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Selective Accountability and Governance in Pakistan: An Analysis of the PTI-Led Government (2018–2022)

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the nature and implications of selective accountability during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government (2018–2022), with particular emphasis on its impact on governance, democratic institutions, and the rule of law in Pakistan. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analyzes anti-corruption legislation, institutional practices, judicial proceedings, official documents, and high-profile accountability cases involving major political actors. Drawing on the theoretical perspective of Lawfare, the study explores how accountability institutions, particularly the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), functioned within Pakistan's political environment during the study period. The findings indicate that accountability mechanisms were applied unevenly, with opposition leaders subjected to extensive investigations, prolonged pre-trial detentions, and intensive media scrutiny. Such patterns of selective accountability weakened institutional credibility, undermined due process, constrained political competition, and adversely affected democratic governance and public confidence in accountability institutions. The study concludes that the restoration of transparent, independent, and non-partisan accountability institutions is essential for reinforcing democratic governance and the rule of law in Pakistan.

***Keywords**: Selective Accountability, Anti-Corruption, Lawfare, Political Victimization, Democratic Governance.*

Introduction
Corruption represents a significant structural challenge for contemporary states, adversely affecting governance capacity, institutional effectiveness, and public confidence. In Pakistan, concerns regarding corruption were formally acknowledged at the time of state formation, when Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in his address to the Constituent Assembly, identified corruption as a critical threat to the political and administrative order of the new state:

"The biggest curses from which India is suffering I do not say that other countries are free from it, but, I think, our condition is much worse is bribery and corruption. That really is a poison. We must put that down with an iron hand and I hope that you will take adequate measures as soon as it is possible for this Assembly to do so." (Jinnah's address to Constituent Assembly, Aug 11, 1947).

Following the policy address delivered by Muhammad Ali Jinnah on August 11, 1947, Pakistan has progressively developed a legal and institutional framework aimed at addressing corruption. However, despite more than seven decades of independence, corruption continues to remain a persistent governance challenge in the country. The evolution of Pakistan's anti-corruption regime has been marked by alternating phases of institutional reform and political instrumentalization, whereby accountability laws and enforcement bodies have often been utilized for political victimization rather than for the impartial administration of justice.

Anti-Corruption Laws in Pakistan

In Pakistan, various anti-corruption laws have been enforced by successive regimes, where the effective execution has remained a key problem. On January 14, 1949 the then Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan had promulgated the Public Representatives and Officers Disqualification Act (PRODA) to check the misuse of authority, and could disqualify politicians for 10 years (Jaffri, 2010). Under this act, one of the first politicians charged with misconduct was Ayub Khoro; Chief Minister (CM) of Sindh, on the allegations of corruption. In 1949, Nawab Mamdot's government in Punjab was dissolved. Liaquat Ali Khan had also initiated legal proceedings against CM of Sindh Pir Ilahi Bakash and disqualified him for six years on the charges of corruption. Similarly, East Pakistan's CM Abdul Kasem Fazl-ul-Haq was dismissed in May, 1954 by Governor General Ghulam Muhammad (Rizvi, 2009). In September 1954, PRODA was denounced as incompatible with democratic norms and hence it was repealed but this act had claimed a few well-known victims before it became un-operational.

In August 1959, Ayub Khan passed the Elected Bodies Disqualification Ordinance (EBDO). Under this ordinance, 75 prominent politicians were disqualified for participating in political activities for 8 years till December 1966 (Pakistan Review of Social Sciences, 2021). Under the EBDO, Ayub Khan primarily targeted East Pakistani politicians from the Awami League (AL) while the Muslim League's leadership largely remained immune (Dawn, 2022). About 6,000 politicians and government officials, half of them from East Pakistan, were disqualified under EBDO (Khan, 2014). Prominent politicians disqualified under the EBDO were first tier leadership of the East Pakistan's Awami League. It included Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani (World Press, 2009).

During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regime (1971-1977), Pakistan witnessed a restructuring of its administrative and legal apparatus under the pretext of socialist reform and anti-corruption drives. Bhutto's government introduced several measures aimed at curbing corruption, including the Federal Security Force (FSF), established to combat economic offenses and ensure political order but soon transformed into an instrument of political coercion (Rizvi, 2009). Among the most notable cases of political victimization was the murder of M Ahmed Khan Kasuri, allegedly orchestrated by the FSF in 1974. It became a central charge against Bhutto after his overthrow (Lahore High Court, 1978). Similarly, opposition figures such as Khawaja Muhammad Rafique were targeted during anti-government protests, and several Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) leaders including Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani and Asghar Khan were detained or harassed under preventive detention laws (Amnesty International, 1977).

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), established through the FIA Act of 1974, traces its institutional roots to the federally controlled, Special Police Establishment (SPE)-1942. It was originally created during world war-II, under British rule to investigate corruption and economic offenses within government departments (Federal Investigation Agency, 1974). During General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977-1988), the FIA was used as an instrument of political suppression against the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), targeting prominent figures such as Benazir Bhutto and Begum Nusrat Bhutto through fabricated charges and arbitrary detentions (Amnesty International, 1995).

During the democratic decade of the 1990s, the pattern of politically driven investigations continued to persist, involving the dismissal of governments on corruption charges (Talbot, 2012). Successive governments instrumentalized the FIA's anti-corruption mandate to persecute opponents. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government also initiated corruption and misuse of authority against Asif Ali Zardari and several Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leaders in 1990-1993. Whereas, Benazir Bhutto's second government (1993-1996) retaliated with FIA-led inquiries targeting leadership of opposition including Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao and members of the Pakistan Muslim League (Al Jazeera, 2016).

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was created in 1999 through the National Accountability Ordinance promulgated by General Pervez Musharraf. Its formation marked a significant shift from earlier mechanisms such as the Ehtesab Bureau, as NAB was granted extensive powers of investigation, arrest, and asset freezing without prior judicial approval. However, its jurisdiction excluded military and judicial officials (National Accountability Ordinance, 1999).

Officially, it was intended to combat corruption and strengthen transparency in public institutions, yet in practice it soon became entangled in Pakistan's political rivalries. During the early 2000s, NAB's inquiries and detentions frequently coincided with efforts by the military regime to consolidate political control through the Pakistan Muslim League (Q). Several opposition leaders, including Benazir Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari, Shehbaz Sharif, and Javed Hashmi, were subjected to lengthy investigations and imprisonment (International Crisis Group, 2002).

After the return of civilian rule in 2008, successive governments continued to rely on NAB as a tool of selective accountability. Under the PPP government (2008-2013), the bureau targeted members of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), while during Nawaz Sharif's tenure (2013-2017) it revived major corruption inquiries against PPP leaders such as Dr. Asim Hussain and Khursheed Shah. The same pattern persisted under the PTI government, when numerous opposition politicians among them Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Hamza Shahbaz, and Rana Sanaullah were arrested on charges later criticized by courts and rights groups for procedural abuse (HRCP, 2020).

Literature Review

The political victimization in Pakistan can be observed by studying the country's turbulent political evolution, identified by weak civilian governments, military regimes and the existence of hybrid governments. Previous studies on the country's politics view that the political repression and victimization emerged soon after the independence, as the governments employed different administrative and legal instruments, e.g, PRODA and EBDO, to counter the opposing voices and to consolidate authority. Authors like Rizvi, Jalal and chaudhry in their works argue that these early practices of institutionalized oppression provided a road map and set a precedent for the use of state authority to control political outcomes. This literature views that the roots of political victimization in Pakistan are embedded in the structures of its political system.

Research on successive civil and military governments has also proved the reinforcement of the earlier patterns of political victimization under new accountability mechanisms. During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule (1972-1977), studies showed that Bhutto employed anti-corruption laws, inquiries and the federally controlled FSF to counter the opposition, mainly PNA leadership. Focusing on Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977-1988), the era was characterized by political victimization driven under the banner of religion, i-e Zia's Islamization, which authorized his regime to curb the resistance of the political parties, especially the MRD leadership. During the period of 1990s, both the PPP and PML-N were engaged in toppling each other through reciprocal accountability, by the frequent employment of inquiries by institutions like FIA and Ehtesaab Commission. Studies contained that these anti-corruption efforts further weakened the democratic process in the country.

The post-1999 studies on the military rule of General Pervaiz Musharraf, signifies the deployment of NAB, as an instrument of political engineering and victimization. Authors such as Fair, khan, and International Crisis Group Analysts have documented the cases where the state institutions were allegedly used to coerce political loyalties, and facilitated in the creation of PML-Q by tearing down PML-N. This era is critical for understanding the long-term consequences of the politically charged accountability, which still prevails in the contemporary politics of Pakistan. The period is marked by the loss of credibility of accountability institutions, mainly the instrumentalization of NAB and FIA.

Within the literature specifically focusing on the PTI-led government (2018–2022), analysts are divided. The accounts supporting PTI's anti-corruption campaign as a part of their elections manifesto and a corrective initiative aimed at dismantling in-rooted patronage networks. A larger body of critical scholarships and researchers however argues that the PTI government continued the historical legacy of selective accountability and the repression of political opponents. This literature identifies NAB's furious actions against opposition leaders, high-profile arrests, media pressure, and the use of administrative measures to curb the resistance. Scholars have particularly emphasized the PTI-era alignment between the executive and accountability institutions by arguing that anti-corruption was framed as a moral-political narrative that justified intense scrutiny of political opponents, on the other hand protecting and shielding government and its allies. News analyses and investigative reports; both by national and international agencies, strengthened this discourse by providing statistical instances of political targeting, unjust implication of laws, and the shrinking space for journalism during this period.

The collective analysis of literature reveals a consistent pattern, followed across different governments and regimes which can be concluded that the accountability mechanisms in Pakistan have rarely functioned as neutral institutions and instead have been instrumentalized for achieving political objectives. While each government presents its actions as legitimate and reformist, scholarly evidence demonstrates them as selective enforcement, coercion, legal manipulation, and institutional imbalance. The existing literature has treated these periods separately and in isolation. This study contributes to the field by relating the historical trajectory of political victimization with the evaluation of its manifestations under the PTI government, and then situating the 2018-2022 periods within the prospect of lawfare in Pakistan.

Research Question

To what extent were anti-corruption laws and accountability institutions applied selectively during the PTI-led government (2018–2022), and what were the implications of such practices for governance and democratic institutions in Pakistan?

Research Objective & Significance

To examine the implementation of anti-corruption laws and accountability institutions during the PTI-led government (2018–2022), and to analyze the extent to which their application influenced governance, institutional credibility, and democratic processes in Pakistan.

This study contributes to the literature on governance and accountability by examining the implementation of anti-corruption laws and accountability institutions during the PTI-led government (2018–2022) through the analytical lens of Lawfare Theory. It provides a systematic assessment of selective accountability and its implications for institutional credibility, the rule of law, and democratic governance in Pakistan. The findings offer valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and governance practitioners seeking to strengthen institutional autonomy, transparency, and impartial accountability mechanisms.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach using a descriptive-analytical research design to examine the implementation of accountability mechanisms and their implications for governance during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government (2018–2022). The analysis is based exclusively on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed literature, government publications, judicial records, reports of national and international organizations, think tanks, and reputable media sources. Data were analyzed through qualitative document analysis and thematic content analysis, guided by Lawfare Theory to examine patterns of selective accountability and institutional practices. To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, information from multiple independent sources was systematically triangulated, enabling an objective and evidence-based assessment of the relationship between accountability institutions, governance, and democratic processes in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework: Lawfare Theory

This study is grounded in Lawfare Theory, which explains how legal instruments and judicial processes may be employed to achieve political or strategic objectives beyond their intended purpose of administering justice. Coined by Charles J. Dunlap Jr. (2001), the concept of lawfare describes the strategic use of law to influence political competition, weaken opponents, and consolidate state authority while maintaining the appearance of constitutional legality. In contemporary political systems, the theory has been widely applied to examine how governments may utilize legislation, accountability institutions, and legal procedures to marginalize political rivals through ostensibly lawful means.

Within this framework, anti-corruption laws and accountability institutions are viewed not only as mechanisms for promoting transparency and good governance but also as instruments that may be selectively applied to influence political outcomes. The broad discretionary powers vested in accountability agencies, combined with the public legitimacy of anti-corruption initiatives, provide governments with opportunities to pursue politically consequential legal actions under the guise of public interest and institutional reform. Lawfare Theory therefore offers an appropriate analytical lens for examining whether accountability mechanisms operate impartially or are employed selectively within a competitive political environment.

Applying this theoretical perspective, the study analyzes the evolution and implementation of Pakistan's accountability framework including PRODA, EBDO, the FIA, and the NAB—to assess the extent to which these institutions have influenced governance and political competition. The theory facilitates an understanding of the dual role of law as both an instrument of democratic governance and a potential mechanism for advancing partisan interests. Accordingly, Lawfare Theory provides the conceptual foundation for evaluating patterns of selective accountability and their implications for institutional credibility, the rule of law, and democratic governance in Pakistan during the PTI-led government (2018–2022).

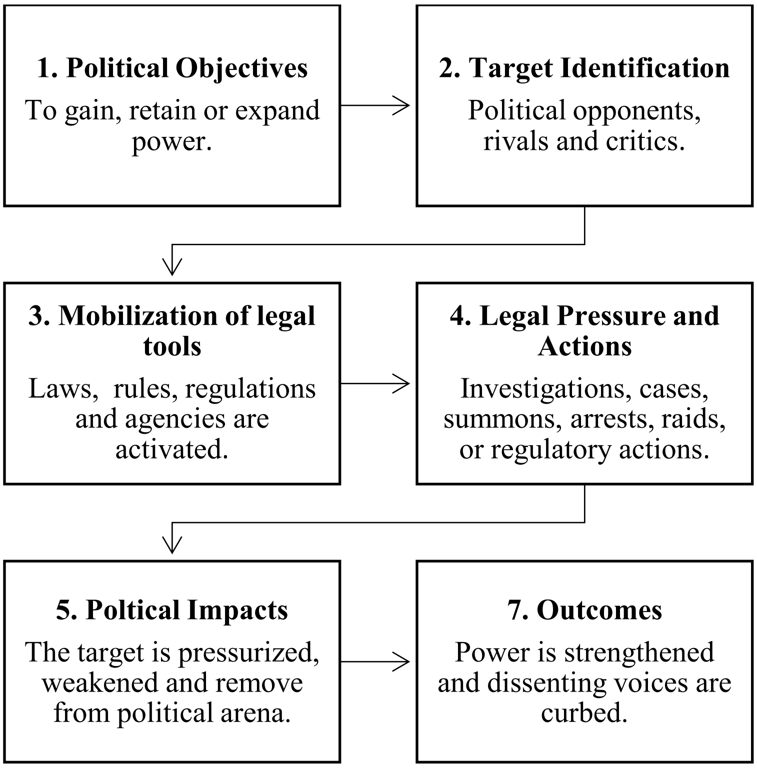

Figure 1: Implication of lawfare theory in a political system

Political Victimization Under Pti Government (2018-22)

A key aspect of Pakistan's accountability landscape during the PTI government was the asymmetric application of anti-corruption mechanisms, where politicians from opposition political parties faced intense scrutinies while several senior PTI leaders despite serious allegations, did not undergo substantive investigation, trial, or prosecution. The PTI, under the leadership of Imran Khan, entered in 2018 general elections with an aggressive anti-corruption narrative. The party's campaign was built around the rhetoric of accountability, transparency, and the eradication of what it termed the *chor* (corrupt elite) that had dominated Pakistan's political landscape for decades. The Panama Papers revelations in 2016, which implicated members of the Sharif family, gave PTI a potent tool to frame its political struggle as a moral crusade against corruption. Imran Khan consistently argued that Pakistan's governance crisis stemmed from institutionalized corruption and elite capture, promising to bring across-the-board accountability if elected to power. This narrative helped PTI attract public support, particularly among the urban middle class and youth who were disillusioned with the PML-N, PPP, ANP and other political parties.

Following PTI's electoral victory in 2018, the anti-corruption drive intensified through the use of state institutions such as the NAB and FIA. While the government described these actions as efforts to restore public confidence in governance, opposition parties and independent analysts saw them as tools of selective accountability. NAB and FIA investigations increasingly targeted members of the opposition, especially leaders of the PML-N and PPP, while several PTI-affiliated figures facing similar allegations remained largely unexamined. Reports from human rights organizations and press bodies highlighted the government's broader pattern of using cybercrime and anti-corruption laws to intimidate political opponents, journalists, civil society members and activists, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship (International Federation of Journalists, 2022).

Accountability Proceedings Against Pml-N Leadership:

I. Conviction of Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz

Among the most high-profile cases were those involving PML-N leader and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He was disqualified by the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) on July 28, 2017 in Panama Papers and ordered NAB to file three separate cases which were respectively known as Aven field, Al-Azizia, and Flagship references (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2017).

In July 2018, an accountability court sentenced Nawaz Sharif to 10 years in Aven field properties corruption reference for owning assets beyond known means and for one year not cooperating with NAB authorities. Islamabad High Court (IHC) also declared him as proclaimed offender in Dec, 2020. Later in 2023, he was acquitted form the case in the verdict announced by a two-member bench of IHC (Dawn, 2023). Nawaz's daughter, Maryam Nawaz, who was also convicted in the Aven field reference for seven years, was later acquitted by the Islamabad High Court in September, 2022 further fueling claims that earlier judgments had been politically motivated (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Following the grafting charges, Nawaz was also charged in Al-Azizia Steel Mills corruption reference, with seven years of detention and also was fined of Rs.1.5 billion. He was released by the same bench in Flagship reference, as prosecution could not prove his link to claimed amount of 10 million dollars in Flagship investments (Dawn, 2018). In November 2023, he was also acquitted by the IHC from the Al-Azizia reference, as the prosecution failed to produce any evidence in order to prove his ownership of assets. But it also pertains to the Sharifs being unable satisfy the court regarding the funds provided to establish AL-Azizia Steel Mills and Hill Metal Establishment (HME) in Saudi Arabia (Dawn, 2023).

This pattern of subsequent investigations, detentions, and then acquittal of the Nawaz Shareef and his daughter, Maryam indicates the employment of lawfare in the accountability mechanism. These proceedings strengthened the PTI's anti-corruption rhetoric and also appeared to play role in smearing the Nawaz's political persona.

II. Accountability cases against Shehbaz Sharif and Hamza Shehbaz

Other senior PML-N leaders faced similar treatment. Opposition Leader in the National Assembly, Shehbaz Sharif (brother of Nawaz Sharif), and his son, Hamza Shehbaz, were repeatedly targeted by NAB and FIA in money-laundering and assets-beyond-means cases, worth reported around Rs7 billion (Dawn, 2020). In September 2020, Shehbaz Sharif was arrested directly from a Lahore court, an action that drew sharp criticism from the opposition and civil society (Al Jazeera, 2020). The proceedings dragged on for years, with multiple bail hearings, prolonged investigations, and media trials, but by 2022 several of the major charges were either dismissed or declared inconclusive (Business Recorder, 2023). Despite the absence of final convictions, the process itself sidelined key opposition figures from parliamentary and electoral politics at crucial moments, suggesting that accountability mechanisms had been weaponized to achieve political ends rather than justice.

III. Narcotics Lawsuit against Rana Sanaullah

Beyond the high-profile arrests of senior opposition figures, the PTI government also directed its accountability drive toward the second tier of political leadership, including parliamentarians, advisors, and close aides of top opposition leaders. Rana Sanaullah's arrest in July 2019 by the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) on accusations of drug trafficking was particularly controversial. The ANF claimed about 15 kilograms of Heroin were recovered from his vehicle at the Ravi toll plaza on Lahore-Islamabad motorway (The Express Tribune, 2019). But in December 2022, Rana Sanaullah was acquitted of all narcotics charges as the ANF failed to prove the evidence connecting him to narcotics possession or trafficking (Dawn, 2022). The then federal minister for States and Frontier Regions, Shehryar Afridi showed his great interest in the case, and claimed the presence strong evidences including video footage and surveillance record, while making remarks like *jaan Allah ko deni hai* (My life belongs to Allah) to build public narrative against Sanaullah (Dawn, 2019; The Express Tribune, 2023). Later in 2023, Afridi disassociated himself from the case, and claimed that the arrest resulted on the basis of intelligence report of Major General Arif Malik, the then Director General ANF (The Express Tribune, 2023). The contradicting stance of Afridi and Sanaullah's acquittal from the case raises concerns about the process of accountability in the country and the involvement of deep-state in the political victimization.

IV. Paragon Housing Society case

In the same vein, Khawaja Saad Rafique and his brother Salman Rafique were arrested in December 2018 in connection with the Paragon Housing Society case. NAB alleged fraud causing a loss of Rs590 million to public in connection with the Paragon scheme, and claimed both Saad Rafique and Salman Rafique alleged beneficiaries of Rs58 million and Rs39 million respectively (The Express Tribune, 2019). Both leaders remained under NAB custody for extended periods without a final conviction, with the Lahore High Court later granting bail while criticizing the accountability bureau for its lack of substantial evidence (Dawn, 2020). In October 2023, NAB officially declared both brothers' innocent after concluding no evidence of corruption against them (Pakistan Today, 2023). The Supreme Court of Pakistan in its judgement in the above-mentioned case also observed that the accountability mechanism in Pakistan has been employed for political engineering rather to serve justice in the country (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2019). These remarks can be interpreted as the use of lawfare to achieve political objectives through the state institutions.

V. Corruption Allegations in the Narowal Sports City project

Ahsan Iqbal, another senior PML-N figure, was arrested in December 2019 on allegations of corruption in the Narowal Sports City project. Ahsan Iqbal was accused for the misuse of his authority by illegally enhancing the scope of the project from Rs34.75 million to Rs2, 994 million approximately (Daily Pakistan, 2022). In September 2022, Islamabad High Court's bench, headed by Chief Justice Athar Minallah, acquitted Ahsan Iqbal, and also criticized NAB's conduct resulting in the dismissal of the reference (Dawn, 2022). Analysts observed that these arrests coincided with critical phases of parliamentary opposition to the government's legislation, raising suspicions of politically motivated timing.

Litigations Involving Pakistan People's Party Leadership:

I. Detention of Asif Zardari and Faryal Talpur in money-laundering case

Alongside PML-N, the PPP leadership, including former President Asif Ali Zardari and his sister Faryal Talpur, was subjected to multiple corruption and money-laundering investigations between 2019 and 2020. The case was initially registered in 2015, identifying 25 fake bank accounts allegedly used to route suspicious funds. In July 2018, FIA included Zardari and Frayal Talpur's names in the allegations of suspicious transactions through fake accounts (Dawn, 2018). In November 2019, NAB filed a supplementary reference alleging additional details about the misuse of bank funds; claimed that Rs8.3 billion were withdrawn from fake accounts (Aaj News, 2019). The arrests of Zardari and Faryal Talpur in June 2019, was widely covered in the media and portrayed by PTI as a landmark step toward ending a legacy of graft. But later on, the charges against Faryal Talpur were dropped on the basis on lack of evidence against her, putting a question mark on the country's accountability process (The News, 2025). The PPP maintained that the government was using NAB to dismantle political pluralism and suppress dissent in Sindh, the party's primary power base.

II. Detention of Khurshid Shah under Corruption Charges

Various PPP leaders from Sindh, including Khurshid Shah, Sharjeel Memon and Syed Owais Qadir Shah, also faced NAB proceedings. In 2019, NAB filed a reference of Rs1.23 billion charging Khurshid Shah, Speaker Sindh Assembly Syed Owais Qadir Shah, MPA Farrukh Shah along with 15 others. Later in September, Khurshid Shah was arrested and held in custody for over a year (Geo News, 2019). After six years, NAB submitted a final challan of over Rs190 million and requested to transfer the case to Anti-corruption Department, due amendment in NAB laws (Daily Times, 2025).

III. Legal Actions against Sharjeel Memon

Sharjeel Memon along with 12 others was accused by NAB of corruption amounting to Rs5.76 billion relating to awarding advertising contracts for Sindh government from 2013-15 (Geo News, 2018). In October 2017, he alongside 12 other co-accused was taken in custody and accountability court indicted him and others in Rs5.76 billion corruption reference (Dawn, 2019). NAB also tied him with cases such as assets-beyond-means-case and Bahria Town Karachi land grab case, but the cases are stuck over the questions of jurisdiction after amendment in NAB laws in 2023 (Dawn, 2025).

Constraints On Press Freedom: Oppression of Journalists and Media Organizations

Alongside its political opponents, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government's anti-corruption and governance agenda also drew criticism for its treatment of journalists, media organizations, and civil society activists. The period from 2018 to 2022, witnessed a marked decline in press freedom, as both traditional and digital media came under increasing state pressure. In 2021, Pakistan ranked 145 out of 180 countries on media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) world Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The FIA's cybercrime wing, operating under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, was frequently used to summon, interrogate, or detain journalists and online commentators critical of government policies. Several media personnel faced charges for "spreading misinformation," "anti-state activity," or "defaming institutions," charges which observers described as vague and overly broad (International Federation of Journalists, 2022). This created a climate of fear and self-censorship, forcing many journalists to tone down criticism or rely on social media pseudonyms to avoid reprisal.

Some of the high-profile cases included the harassment and arrests of journalists such as Asad Ali Toor, Absar Alam, and Matiullah Jan. Absar Alam, a former chairman of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), was shot on April 20, 2021 after repeatedly criticizing the government and its handling of accountability institutions (HRCP, 2022). Similarly, Asad Ali Toor, a vocal government critic, was assaulted in his Islamabad apartment May 25, 2021 by unidentified men; who identified themselves as belonging to Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), after Toor had publicly questioned military influence over political and media affairs. He was beaten and threatened to be killed by the attackers, and was forced to raise slogans in favor of country and the armed forces (Amnesty International, 2022). The abduction of senior journalist Matiullah Jan on July 21, 2020 for 12 hours, in broad daylight in Islamabad, symbolized the growing impunity enjoyed by those targeting dissenting voices (Dawn, 2021). In each of these incidents, inquiries were either inconclusive or failed to identify perpetrators, reinforcing perceptions that elements within the state tolerated, or were complicit in, the suppression of independent journalism (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021).

In addition to physical violence and intimidation, economic coercion became a prominent tool of control. The government and its regulatory agencies reportedly influenced the allocation of advertisement revenue to private media houses, rewarding compliant outlets while punishing critical ones. Major networks such as Geo News, Dawn, and the Jang Group faced multiple disruptions, including suspension of transmission, withdrawal of advertisements, and fabricated tax or property cases. Journalists from these outlets described the strategy as a form of "financial strangulation," intended to curb dissent without overt censorship (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Simultaneously, PEMRA issued repeated warnings and show-cause notices against news channels that aired opposition viewpoints or questioned government policy, particularly in relation to NAB's operations and the military's role in politics. These actions by the state institutions against the dissenting voices among journalists and media groups can be interpreted as the exercise of lawfare to conceal the governance of PTI.

Institutional Bias and Protection of Pti Leadership:

Meanwhile during this period (2018-2022), the PTI leadership despite serious corruption allegations, remained immune from the institutional oversight and the accountability process (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

I. Exemption of Jahangir Tareen from institutional oversight

Among the most prominent figures was Jahangir Khan Tareen, a key financier and political organizer for PTI. Although allegations regarding his business, sugar mill operations, and influence over agricultural pricing had circulated widely for years, no formal accountability proceedings were initiated against him during 2018-19. Later in 2020, Sugar Inquiry Commission identified manipulation of production costs and sales reporting by major sugar mills; specifically naming Tareen's group, these developments occurred after the initial period of PTI's rule (Pro Pakistani, 2020). Throughout 2018-19, Tareen remained central to party decision-making and government formation, illustrating the protective buffer enjoyed by select insiders. Later in 2021, Tareen was charged with irregularities of Rs110 billion in "sugar scam" alongside Hamza Shehbaz, and also for money laundering charges of about Rs 5 billion (Dawn, 2021). But, no allegations of money laundering were proved in the investigation by FIA and Tareen got relief from judiciary in Nov, 2025 (Tribune, 2023).

II. Corruption allegations on Pervez Khattak

Pervez Khattak, who faced multiple allegations rooting from his tenure as CM of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK); including concerns regarding the Peshawar Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project; for allegedly expanding project's budget from Rs9 billion to Rs40 billion, Malam Jabba lease; alleged illegal lease of 275 acres of state forestland, and his alleged involvement in illegal appointments at Pakistan-Australian Institute (The Express Tribune, 2018; Dawn, 2021; The Express Tribune, 2019). While opposition parties filed complaints and media investigations repeatedly highlighted irregularities, NAB either closed or declined to further pursue inquiries, officially citing "lack of evidence" (The News, 2024). Despite ongoing public concerns, Khattak was elevated to the position of Federal Minister for Defense, reinforcing perceptions that accountability remained subordinate to political loyalty.

III. Offshore Holdings of Zulfi Bukhari

In the case of Zulfi Bukhari, a close aide to Prime Minister Imran Khan, allegations regarding offshore holdings and questionable land acquisitions by his close family members were widely discussed in media and political forums. NAB acknowledged an inquiry in late 2018, but no charges, trial, or significant proceedings followed during 2018-2019 (Dawn, 2018). Bukhari continued to serve as Special Assistant to the Prime Minister, further contributing to critiques of selective enforcement of anti-corruption laws.

IV. Involvement of Aleem Khan in Corruption scandals

Aleem Khan presents a partial exception. Although NAB arrested him briefly in early 2019 on charges of assets-beyond-known-means, his offshore company Hexam Investment Overseas Ltd, and inquiries into his involvement in the Park View Housing Society, River Age Housing

Society, and Multan Road. The process followed prolonged delays and an eventual absence of prosecutorial progress. Courts repeatedly pressed NAB to expedite the case, but it remained dormant, and Aleem Khan was soon reintegrated into political activities following bail (Dawn, 2019a; Dawn, 2019b). The sluggish pace of proceedings contradicted sharply with the swift arrests and aggressive pursuit of opposition leaders during the same period, supporting arguments that accountability was used asymmetrically.

V. Fiscal Irregularities during Provincial Government in KPK

Beyond individual cases, the KP's prolonged governance portfolio under PTI; including the Billion Tree Tsunami project, health sector reforms, education reforms, procurement processes were alleged of financial irregularities worth Rs152 billion were frequently highlighted by journalists, civil society actors, and rival parties (Ground Zero, 2024; Pakistan Today, 2024). Despite these allegations, PTI's provincial and federal leadership faced no substantial accountability during 2018-2019. The absence of institutional follow-through on high-visibility controversies, while opposition cases advanced rapidly, indicates a structurally uneven accountability environment.

These incidents highlight the employment of lawfare and politically contingent nature of accountability under the PTI administration. High-ranking PTI leaders benefitted from institutional inertia and political protection, while opposition figures confronted proactive investigations, arrests, and extensive media trials. This pattern demonstrates how anti-corruption regimes may become instruments of political victimization, disproportionately target adversaries while insulate allies, thereby distorting democratic competition and weakening public trust in accountability institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of accountability mechanisms during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government (2018–2022) to assess their implications for governance and democratic institutions in Pakistan. The findings indicate that accountability institutions, particularly the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), were applied unevenly, with opposition political leaders facing extensive investigations, prolonged pre-trial detentions, and intensive media scrutiny, while comparable allegations involving government affiliates received comparatively limited institutional attention. These patterns suggest that accountability mechanisms operated in ways consistent with selective accountability, raising important concerns regarding procedural fairness, institutional impartiality, and public confidence in the accountability framework. Viewed through the lens of Lawfare Theory, the findings demonstrate how legal and accountability institutions may function not only as mechanisms for combating corruption but also as instruments capable of influencing political competition within hybrid democratic systems. The analysis indicates that the strategic use of accountability processes, together with legal proceedings and media narratives, contributed to heightened political polarization, weakened institutional credibility, and reduced trust in the impartiality of state institutions. The study also finds that pressures on journalists and media organizations during the period under review further constrained public debate and narrowed the space for democratic accountability.

The study therefore concludes that the long-term effectiveness of Pakistan's anti-corruption framework depends upon strengthening the institutional independence, transparency, and accountability of oversight bodies. Reforms should focus on enhancing judicial oversight, ensuring due process, limiting discretionary executive influence over accountability institutions, and establishing transparent procedural safeguards that promote equal application of the law.

Such reforms would contribute to restoring public confidence in accountability institutions, strengthening the rule of law, and reinforcing democratic governance in Pakistan

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