

HYBRID DEMOCRACY, INSTITUTIONAL DOMINANCE AND POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION IN PAKISTAN (2021–2024)

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's hybrid democracy during the period from 2021 to 2024, examining the intricate interplay between institutional dominance, civil–military relations, political fragmentation and economic governance in shaping the country's democratic trajectory. Anchored in hybrid regime theory, the research reveals that although Pakistan's democratic institutions including the parliament, judiciary and Election Commission retained their formal structures and procedures, their functional autonomy remained constrained by pervasive military influence, judicial overreach and the practice of selective accountability. The execution of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022, followed by widespread civil unrest and the contentious general elections of 2024, epitomized the persistent struggle between democratic norms and authoritarian practices. The analysis further identifies how political polarization deepened across party lines, while economic governance became increasingly militarized through mechanisms such as the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), effectively merging economic and security imperatives. Concurrently, restrictions on civil liberties and dissent contributed to growing public disillusionment and weakened the social foundations of democracy. The findings suggest that rather than progressing toward democratic consolidation, Pakistan's political system continued to embody the characteristics of a hybrid regime where formal democratic frameworks coexist with informal authoritarian controls. The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent necessity of comprehensive electoral reforms, the empowerment of civilian institutions and the reorientation of national security priorities toward a people centered democratic model capable of ensuring political stability and genuine participatory governance.

Introduction

One of the clearest features of Pakistan's political landscape between 2021 and 2024 was the deep fragmentation and polarization that gripped the country. Politics stopped being a contest of policies and turned instead into a constant battle of survival between rival camps. Parties were no longer just competing for votes; they were fighting to delegitimize each other, often treating

opponents as enemies rather than as fellow participants in a shared democratic system. After the fall of Imran Khan Government in April 2022, this polarization grew sharper than ever. (PTI) portrayed Khan's ouster as a conspiracy orchestrated by the military establishment and opposition parties. On the other side, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) a

coalition of parties including PMLN, PPP and others framed Khan as an irresponsible populist who had lost parliamentary support. What might have been a normal political transition in a functioning democracy instead became a bitter national divide, with millions of citizens drawn into opposing camps that spoke different political languages and consumed different media narratives. This fragmentation was not just about PTI versus PDM. Within parties themselves, divisions emerged. Some PTI leaders broke away under pressure after the May 9, 2023 protests, forming splinter groups or joining newly engineered parties backed by the establishment. Smaller regional parties also used the uncertainty to bargain for greater influence (Nisa, 2025). Instead of producing a healthy multiparty democracy, the splintering reinforced the sense that Pakistan's politics was being manipulated from above, with alliances created and broken to serve short term interests rather than long term stability. The polarization also had a deep social impact. Families, workplaces and even classrooms often became battlegrounds of political debate. On social media, toxic partisanship created echo chambers where misinformation thrived. Supporters of different parties stopped seeing each other as political opponents and began treating each other as existential threats to the nation's future. This kind of polarization made compromise the lifeblood of any democracy nearly impossible. Every decision, whether about elections, governance, or accountability, was interpreted through the lens of mistrust. Institutional fragmentation followed the same pattern. Parliament became paralyzed, with boycotts and walkouts replacing debate. Provincial governments clashed with the center, particularly in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where PTI's influence remained strong. Even within the judiciary, conflicting verdicts and accusations of bias exposed deep divisions. Instead of being an arena for resolving disputes, institutions themselves became arenas of political contestation. What makes this fragmentation particularly dangerous is how it interacts with Pakistan's hybrid democracy. In a context where the military already plays an oversized role,

political polarization makes civilian institutions even weaker. Instead of uniting to protect democratic space, parties often turn to unelected institutions for support against their rivals. This short-term strategy deepens the cycle of dependence and prevents the development of a stable democratic culture (Alam, 2025). By the time of the 2024 elections, fragmentation and polarization had left Pakistan's political system brittle and exhausted. Voters went to the polls not with confidence in their institutions, but with a sense of uncertainty and suspicion. The election did not resolve the divides; it merely froze them in place. The result is a democracy where politics is less about collective progress and more about endless confrontation, with the risk of instability always lurking beneath the surface (Nisa, 2025).

The study employs descriptive methods to investigate existing knowledge and experiences related to democratic practices intermixed with authoritarian control. Data collection includes both primary and secondary sources. Primary data may consist of interviews, observations and official documents to capture firsthand accounts and contemporary realities. Secondary data involves literature review, analysis of reports, media coverage and previous research studies to contextualize findings within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks. The methodology emphasizes a comprehensive examination of political institutions, civil-military relations and political behavior to understand the interplay between democratic institutions and authoritarian influences. It provide a detailed descriptive analysis rather than quantitative measurement, focusing on the complexities and nuances of political power dynamics, institutional weaknesses and state-society relations. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of hybrid democracy as a system characterized by simultaneous democratic processes and authoritarian practices, highlighting the constraints on political freedoms and the role of dominant power centers in shaping governance in Pakistan.

Theoretical Perspective

Hybrid political systems often retain outward features of democracy—such as elections, parliaments and basic constitutional procedures—yet these structures are consistently limited by actors who hold authority without electoral legitimacy. Elections may be conducted at regular intervals, but the scope for genuine competition is restricted through administrative control, unequal access to resources, or institutional manipulation. Opposition parties are allowed to operate, though their capacity to challenge the ruling establishment is frequently weakened through legal, political, or economic pressures. Independent institutions, including the media and judiciary, remain formally present but are often influenced or co-opted in ways that reduce their ability to act autonomously. Scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2010) describe this pattern as “competitive authoritarianism,” where democratic procedures exist but are systematically distorted (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

A central feature of such systems is the expanded role of the military in political life. Instead of remaining subordinate to elected civilian leaders—as prescribed by classical civil-military relations theory (Huntington, 1957) the armed forces participate directly in governance or exert indirect control over major policy decisions. This involvement marks a departure from the ideal model of civilian supremacy and indicates a political order in which the military shapes outcomes that should ordinarily be determined through civilian processes (Huntington, 1957). When military institutions become key political actors, the prospects for democratic deepening are significantly reduced (Zaheer, 2025).

The persistence of weak and fragmented political institutions further strengthens this pattern. Political parties often lack stable ideological programs and instead revolve around prominent personalities, fluid alliances and patronage-based networks. As underscored by Dr. Muhammad Akram Zaheer in his interview this form of party politics limits the development of strong civilian leadership and restricts the emergence of programmatic competition. Fragile institutional foundations make it easier for non-elected actors, particularly the military and bureaucratic elites,

to intervene in political affairs or maintain veto power over major decisions (Zaheer D. M., 2025). Hybrid systems are also shaped by a fluctuating balance of power between civilian officials and military authorities. The interaction between these actors often produces periodic tensions, institutional confrontation, or open political crises. When disagreements escalate, the military’s entrenched position gives it the ability to override or disrupt democratic processes, leading to episodes of instability, democratic backsliding, or partial breakdowns. Scholars such as Diamond (2002) and Schedler (2006) argue that such tensions account for the repeated interruptions of democratic trajectories in several countries (Schelder, 2006).

Taken together, these features distorted democratic mechanisms, an assertive military role, weak political institutions and contentious civil-military relations explain why democratic norms coexist with authoritarian practices in hybrid regimes. The framework helps clarify how these political orders endure over time: democratic procedures remain formally intact, however their substance is curtailed by institutional fragility and the dominance of unelected power centers.

Civil Liberties under Strain

Civil rights and freedoms in Pakistan came under severe strain, revealing the deeper contradictions of a hybrid democratic system. While the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, association and political participation, the lived reality for many citizens was defined by restrictions, surveillance and selective enforcement of laws. These barriers not only curtailed individual liberties but also weakened the credibility of Pakistan’s democratic process, reinforcing the sense that rights existed more on paper than in practice (IDEA, 2023). One of the most visible limitations was the restriction on freedom of expression, which targeted journalists, activists and political dissenters. The media environment grew increasingly constrained as television channels were taken off air for airing critical content, while journalists faced intimidation, arrests and organized online

harassment campaigns. Social media a vibrant platform for political mobilization, especially for Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was routinely throttled or blocked during protests and political crises. Although the government justified these actions as necessary for maintaining public order, critics regarded them as direct assaults on democratic freedoms. Ordinary citizens felt the consequences firsthand, as their ability to express dissent or access diverse viewpoints was limited by state intervention (Afridi, 2024). Another critical area of concern was the suppression of political participation and freedom of assembly. Following Imran Khan's ouster in April 2022 and particularly after his arrest in May 2023, mass protests were met with heavy-handed crackdowns. Thousands of PTI supporters were detained under broad legal provisions and military courts were controversially revived to try civilians accused of attacking state property. Public gatherings were frequently banned under emergency orders. These actions not only curtailed the right to protest but also signaled that political activism carried heavy personal risks. The shrinking space for peaceful participation raised fears that Pakistan was drifting toward authoritarian control under the guise of hybrid democracy (Javed Bhayo, 2025). Selective accountability and misuse of legal frameworks further eroded public confidence in democratic governance. Anti-corruption drives long used as instruments of political manipulation were applied unevenly. Leaders critical of the establishment faced legal persecution, disqualification, or imprisonment, while allies were often shielded from scrutiny. This selective application of justice deepened public skepticism toward the impartiality of courts and accountability institutions, which appeared more aligned with political interests than with rule of law (Asim, 2025).

Broader civil liberties such as privacy and digital rights were also under pressure. Reports of surveillance, online monitoring and arbitrary detention fostered a pervasive climate of fear. Human rights organizations documented numerous cases of enforced disappearances, particularly in Baluchistan and Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa, where security concerns were invoked to justify extraordinary measures. For the families of the disappeared, the denial of basic due process symbolized the profound erosion of fundamental rights. Taken together, these developments demonstrate how Pakistan's hybrid democracy between 2021 and 2024 preserved the appearance of democratic institutions parliaments, courts and elections while restricting the substantive elements of democracy: freedom of speech, political participation and institutional accountability. The persistence of such constraints not only weakened democratic legitimacy but also deepened public mistrust in institutions meant to safeguard rights and freedoms (Watch, 2025).

Controlled Media and Political Crackdowns

Between 2021 and 2024, civil-military relations in Pakistan did not merely shape politics they defined the entire trajectory of governance. For decades, Pakistanis have been accustomed to the military's influence in political affairs sometimes overt, sometimes subtle but during this period, the boundaries between civilian authority and military dominance became unusually blurred and visible. It is whispered in private or hinted at in newspapers became the centerpiece of public discourse, televised debates and street protests, exposing the inner workings of hybrid rule to ordinary citizens (Hussain, 2025).

At the beginning of Imran Khan's government, many perceived his tenure as a product of a carefully crafted civil-military partnership. Critics described his 2018 electoral victory as "engineered" through establishment support, as opposition leaders faced legal challenges, media restrictions and orchestrated defections. In return, Khan appeared to align himself closely with the military's strategic priorities. On issues such as India, Afghanistan and security policy, his rhetoric mirrored that of the establishment. For a time, this alliance projected an image of unity Pakistan was said to be "on one page." To some citizens weary of instability, this hybrid arrangement seemed a tolerable compromise: imperfect democracy, but at least stable governance (Walsh, 2025).

However, by 2021, cracks began to appear in this partnership. The most visible rift emerged over the appointment of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief. When Khan delayed approval of the military's preferred candidate, insisting on his constitutional authority as prime minister, it was viewed as a rare and risky assertion of civilian power. Although the matter was eventually resolved, it exposed the fragility of the civil-military balance. Even leaders favored by the establishment could fall out of grace for challenging institutional control (Asim, 2025).

The no-confidence motion that removed Khan in April 2022 further intensified these tensions. PTI supporters perceived his ouster not as a parliamentary process but as an orchestrated move by the establishment. Khan himself fueled this perception, claiming that his removal was part of a broader conspiracy involving both domestic and foreign actors. Whether or not these allegations were true, their impact was profound: for millions of Pakistanis, the episode confirmed the belief that elected governments survived only with military approval. Civil-military relations, an elite-level dynamic, had now become the central fault line in national politics (Zaheer D. M., 2025).

Khan's open criticism of the military marked a historic break from Pakistan's political norms. Whereas previous leaders had hinted at interference, Khan named individuals and accused them of betrayal in public speeches. His rhetoric mobilized a large section of society, particularly on social media, where campaigns against military dominance proliferated. The long-standing taboo against criticizing the armed forces was shattered, transforming the military from a revered institution into a subject of very political debate (Wasif, 2024).

The confrontation culminated in May 2023 after Khan's dramatic arrest. Protests erupted nationwide, with crowds storming cantonments and damaging military symbols—acts previously unthinkable in Pakistan. These events shocked the establishment and revealed a new political energy where citizens were willing to challenge military authority directly. The state's response was swift and uncompromising: a sweeping

crackdown ensued, thousands were detained, party leaders defected under pressure and military courts were revived to prosecute protesters. By late 2023, the establishment had reasserted control through familiar tools of repression and political engineering, but the old equilibrium had been irreversibly altered (Rehman & Shorong,, 2021).

By the 2024 elections, Pakistan's democracy was deeply scarred. The military's influence remained entrenched, yet its dominance was now openly acknowledged and contested. Society had become more polarized PTI supporters viewed the military as the principal obstacle to democracy, while critics of Khan continued to see it as a stabilizing force. Civil-military relations were no longer an elite tug-of-war but a defining element of public political identity (Ahmed, 2023).

What distinguishes this phase from earlier periods of hybrid rule is its exposure and intensity. In the 1990s, governments were dismissed discreetly through presidential orders; under Musharraf, military rule was direct but masked by civilian facades. Even during 2008–2018, confrontations remained largely institutional. In contrast, between 2021 and 2024, the struggle over civil-military dominance unfolded in full public view—on streets, in courts and across digital platforms. This period taught Pakistanis not only that their democracy was hybrid but also precisely how that hybrid system functioned and punished those who sought to challenge it (Noor, 2024).

Barriers Civil Rights and Freedoms

From 2021 to 2024, civil rights and freedoms in Pakistan came under severe strain, reflecting the deeper contradictions of its hybrid democratic system. While the Constitution formally guarantees freedom of speech, association and political participation, the lived reality for many citizens was shaped by restrictions, surveillance and the selective application of laws. These barriers not only curtailed individual liberties but also undermined the credibility of Pakistan's democratic process, reinforcing the perception that formal rights existed on paper but not in practice (Ali & Sameen, March 6, 2025).

One of the most visible barriers during this period was the restriction on freedom of expression, particularly targeting journalists, activists and political dissenters. The media environment grew increasingly constrained, with television channels taken off air for airing critical content and journalists facing intimidation, arrests, or online harassment campaigns. Social media, which had become a powerful tool of mobilization, especially for Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was regularly throttled or blocked during protests and political crises. Although the government and state institutions justified these actions as necessary for maintaining public order, critics viewed them as clear violations of democratic freedoms. Ordinary citizens felt the consequences directly, as their ability to express dissent or access alternative viewpoints was increasingly limited by state intervention (CIVICUS, 2023).

Another significant barrier emerged through the suppression of political participation and assembly. Mass protests following Khan's ouster in 2022 and particularly after his arrest in May 2023, were met with heavy-handed crackdowns. Thousands of PTI workers were detained under broad legal provisions, while military courts were controversially used to try civilians accused of attacking state property. Public gatherings were frequently banned under emergency orders and opposition leaders faced restrictions on movement and speech. These measures not only restricted opposition mobilization but also signaled that political activism carried heavy personal risks. For many citizens, the space to peacefully participate in politics shrank dramatically, raising concerns about whether Pakistan was moving closer to authoritarian control under the guise of hybrid democracy (Ali & Sameen, March 6, 2025).

Civil rights were further undermined through selective accountability and the misuse of legal frameworks. Anti-corruption campaigns, long used in Pakistan as instruments of political engineering, were again applied unevenly. Leaders critical of the establishment often faced legal cases, disqualification, or imprisonment, while political allies were shielded from similar

scrutiny. This selective application of law reinforced perceptions that the legal system functioned less as an impartial mechanism of justice and more as a tool of political control. Consequently, citizens grew increasingly skeptical of whether courts and accountability institutions could serve as neutral guardians of rights (International, 2025).

Moreover, broader civil liberties such as privacy and digital rights also faced persistent threats. Reports of surveillance, online monitoring and arbitrary detention created a pervasive climate of fear. Human rights organizations documented numerous cases of enforced disappearances, particularly in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where security concerns were frequently invoked to justify extraordinary measures. For the families of the disappeared, the denial of basic due process symbolized the deep erosion of fundamental rights and the state's disregard for human dignity. Taken together, these barriers illustrate how Pakistan's hybrid democracy between 2021 and 2024 preserved the outward appearance of democratic institutions such as parliaments, courts and elections while curtailing the substance of democracy itself: the ability of citizens to speak freely, assemble without fear and hold power accountable (Nadeem, 2025). The persistence of such restrictions not only weakened democratic legitimacy but also deepened public mistrust in the very institutions meant to safeguard rights and freedoms (National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), 2024).

Institutional Power and Civilian Supremacy

Pakistan's political setting has long been shaped by the dominance of its military establishment. For much of the country's history, the military has ruled directly or exerted strong influence over elected governments, resulting in a fragile and unpredictable democratic system. Despite this legacy, recent years have witnessed a growing demand for civilian supremacy and more transparent democratic governance. The interaction between powerful military institutions and elected civilian governments continues to define Pakistan's governance model. While the

persistence of civilian resistance movements such as the PDM signals an aspiration toward democratic consolidation, the enduring strength of military influence keeps Pakistan's democracy in a hybrid form a mixture of civilian rule and institutional dominance that challenges the full realization of democratic norms (Aslam, 2025).

During 2021 and 2024, Pakistan experienced one of the most turbulent phases in its political history. On the surface, it appeared to function as a democracy, parliament existed, political parties operated and general elections were held. Yet beneath this appearance lay a more complex reality: unelected institutions, particularly the military and judiciary, continued to play decisive roles in shaping political outcomes. This coexistence of democratic structures with authoritarian practices made Pakistan a textbook example of what scholars describe as *hybrid democracy* (Deepening Pakistan's enduring civil-military imbalance, 2025).

Civil military relations were central to this imbalance. The Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) government, led by Imran Khan, began 2021 aligned with the military establishment. However, disagreements over key appointments soon revealed cracks in this alliance. By April 2022, when Khan was ousted through a no confidence vote, it was evident that the loss of military support had rendered his government unsustainable. The succeeding Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition, though backed by state institutions, found its autonomy constrained by the very forces that had facilitated its rise (Dawn, 2025).

The situation escalated further after Khan's arrest in May 2023, when nationwide protests including unprecedented demonstrations outside military installations challenged the traditional boundaries of civil military relations. The subsequent crackdown, marked by mass arrests of PTI leaders and workers, reaffirmed the enduring centrality of the security establishment in defining Pakistan's political space. Concurrently, political fragmentation deepened this institutional dominance. The PTI, the ruling party, was reduced to a weakened opposition through defections and repression. The Pakistan

Muslim League Nawaz (PML N) returned to power but remained divided between Nawaz and Shehbaz Sharif factions, which hampered decisive governance. The Pakistan People Party (PPP) acted as a coalition partner but largely confined its focus to preserving its Sindh stronghold. Instead of uniting to strengthen parliamentary authority or defend democratic norms, parties turned against one another, leaving the political system fractured and vulnerable to external manipulation. This disunity allowed unelected actors to consolidate their influence further (Hussain, 2025).

Economic governance made these structural weaknesses even more visible. Inflation surged, foreign reserves dwindled and debt burdens intensified. The PTI government had already faced difficulties in negotiating with the IMF and when the PDM coalition assumed office, it too was trapped between enforcing unpopular economic reforms and managing public discontent. Unelected institutions again played a role: the military safeguarded its economic interests and steered major projects like CPEC; the judiciary issued rulings that delayed policy implementation; and the bureaucracy often resisted reform under the guise of administrative continuity. For ordinary citizens, these power struggles translated into daily hardships rising prices, job insecurity and a pervasive sense that no one, elected or unelected, was accountable for their suffering (IDEA, 2023).

The interplay between security and electoral politics brought Pakistan's hybrid democracy into sharper focus. Political rallies frequently turned violent and protests in 2022 and 2023 blurred the line between dissent and disorder. Security forces not only maintained public order but also curtailed opposition activity by restricting campaigns, detaining candidates and influencing media coverage. By the time Pakistanis went to the polls in February 2024, the electoral process appeared democratic in form but was constrained in practice. PTI candidates contested as independents, pre poll manipulation was alleged and the state justified its restrictions under the pretext of maintaining stability. Yet for many citizens, a troubling question persisted: if security

institutions determine the political boundaries (Ali & Sameen, March 6, 2025).

Taken together, these years exposed the central paradox of Pakistan's political order. Democracy functioned as a form with elections, campaigns and governments changing hands but not as a substance in which the people will was genuinely decisive. Civilian governments bore responsibility for failures yet lacked the authority to determine their course. Unelected institutions acted as guardians of the state but remained unaccountable to the public. Meanwhile, political parties eroded democratic space through infighting and opportunism. The result was a cycle of instability that deepened public disillusionment (Thapa, 2024).

Conclusion

The challenges Pakistan's hybrid democracy faced between 2021 and 2024 highlight a deeper struggle in defining the very essence of governance in the country. The dominance of unelected institutions undermined the authority of elected officials, creating a parallel power structure that limited the effectiveness of democratic processes. This imbalance eroded public trust in democratic institutions, as many citizens perceived that elections did not translate into real power or accountability. Political parties often divided by personal interests and lacking clear ideological foundations, failed to provide stable and effective leadership. Their fragility resulted in political volatility, frequent shifts in alliances and limited policy continuity, making it harder to address Pakistan's pressing economic and social issues. The recurring economic crises further compounded these problems by constraining government capacity and fueling public dissatisfaction, which sometimes was exploited to justify non-democratic interventions. Additionally, the entrenched influence of security forces over political and economic matters blurred the boundary between civilian governance and military control. This coexistence prevented the full establishment of democratic norms, such as civilian supremacy and institutional checks and balances. For democracy to genuinely flourish, Pakistan must move

beyond the formalities of elections and work towards building strong, autonomous institutions that can operate transparently and independently. Central to this transformation is a political culture that embraces constitutionalism, respect for the rule of law and the principle that no institution is above democratic accountability. Political parties should evolve to become genuine representatives of diverse social and economic interests rather than vehicles for elite bargaining. Empowering the citizenry through education, media freedom and inclusive participation will ensure that people's voices shape policy decisions and hold their leaders responsible. In summary, the period from 2021 to 2024 was a test of Pakistan's democratic resilience. Overcoming the hybrid democracy's shortcomings requires deep reforms both institutional and cultural that embed democracy not just as a political system but also as a shared national value, capable of ensuring political stability, social justice and sustainable development.

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