

HYBRID REGIMES AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING PAKISTAN'S CIVIL-MILITARY POWER DYNAMICS.

Sohail Maqsood Bhatti^{*1}, Prof. Dr. Syed Khawajah Al-Qama²

^{*1}PhD Scholar, Minhaj University, Lahore

²Dean of Social Sciences, Minhaj University, Lahore.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17018376>

Keywords

Hybrid Regimes; Political Polarization; Civil-Military Relations; Democratic Backsliding

Article History

Received on 30 May 2025

Accepted on 05 August 2025

Published on 30 August 2025

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Sohail Maqsood Bhatti

Abstract

Pakistan's evolution into a hybrid regime—where formal electoral competition coexists with informal vetoes and coercive administrative practices—is examined through the interplay of civil-military bargaining and political polarization as drivers of democratic backsliding. Spanning 2008–2025, the study synthesizes theories of hybrid/competitive authoritarianism with civil-military relations to trace mechanisms such as pre-election engineering of party and ballot access, selective prosecutions (“lawfare”), media regulation, and episodic internet shutdowns. Using qualitative process-tracing that triangulates event evidence with trends from democracy and rights indices, it highlights inflection points around the 2018 transition, the 2022 no-confidence episode, and the 2024 polls. The analysis shows polarization functioning both as an instrument—mobilizing supporters while delegitimizing rivals and watchdogs—and as an outcome of power-sharing arrangements that weaken horizontal (judicial-legislative) and vertical (electoral) accountability without suspending elections. The article concludes with a reform agenda: insulating the Election Commission and prosecutors, placing statutory limits on network shutdowns, strengthening parliamentary oversight of the security sector and military-linked enterprises, and safeguarding digital and civic space to restore a level electoral playing field.

INTRODUCTION

Since the restoration of civilian rule in 2008, Pakistan's politics have been shaped by a persistent tension between elected authorities and powerful unelected institutions, especially the military establishment. Rather than consolidating as a liberal democracy or reverting to overt military rule, the country displays the hallmarks of a hybrid regime: competitive elections, legislatures, and courts coexist with informal vetoes, behind-the-scenes brokerage, and selective enforcement that influence who can compete, what can be said, and how power is actually exercised (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). In such settings, democratic backsliding occurs incrementally through legal change and discretionary

enforcement—what scholars' term “executive aggrandizement” and “strategic electoral manipulation”—rather than through abrupt breakdowns (Bermeo, 2016).

Conceptually, competitive authoritarianism refines the hybrid-regime label by emphasizing that political competition is real yet systematically unfair: incumbents tilt the playing field through control of state resources, media access, and rule-application while preserving formal electoral procedures (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). Backsliding, in this view, is not a temporary deviation but a cumulative erosion of liberal-democratic guarantees—civil liberties, judicial independence, and genuine

contestation—produced by routine governance choices rather than extraordinary coups (Bermeo, 2016). Polarization deepens this erosion when parties and publics come to see rivals as illegitimate or existential threats, lowering tolerance for pluralism and raising incentives to bypass procedural constraints (McCoy & Somer, 2019).

Pakistan's civil-military relations create the enabling environment for these dynamics. Even in periods of civilian rule, the armed forces retain far-reaching prerogatives in national security, foreign policy, and segments of the economy, producing a tutelary order in which governments rotate under informal constraints (Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2017). These structural prerogatives interact with partisan competition to generate a repertoire of influence that manages contention without suspending elections: pre-electoral engineering of party and ballot access, selective prosecutions and investigations ("lawfare"), pressure on media ecosystems, and episodic disruptions to digital communication that blunt mobilization and monitoring (Amnesty International, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

In this context, political polarization is both an instrument and an outcome. Political entrepreneurs use divisive narratives to mobilize supporters and delegitimize watchdogs; security and judicial actors justify exceptional measures as necessary for "order"; and opposition forces escalate disruptive tactics in response—all of which erode the willingness of actors to accept adverse outcomes within the rules of the game (McCoy & Somer, 2019). Comparative indicators echo this pattern: measures of liberal democracy and civic space for Pakistan have trended downward in recent years, while expert-coded series flag intensifying polarization as a systemic risk (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025). The central claim advanced here is that Pakistan's recent trajectory is best understood as a reallocation of power inside a formally electoral order: civil-military bargains shape where manipulation occurs (courts, media, party regulation) more than whether elections occur; polarization supplies the justificatory narratives; and the cumulative effect is democratic backsliding without overt regime rupture (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Bermeo, 2016).

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Hybrid Regimes, Competitive Authoritarianism, and Democratic Backsliding

Scholarships on regime change since the Cold War have converged on concepts that capture polities where elections persist, but competition is systematically skewed. Hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism describe systems in which incumbents keep formal electoral institutions while using state resources, legal tools, and informal pressure to tilt the playing field (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). This literature emphasizes mechanisms ranging from media capture and harassment of opponents to manipulation of ballot access and administrative rules—what Schedler terms the "menu of manipulation" (Schedler, 2006, 2013). In parallel, the democratic backsliding literature documents a shift from overt breakdown to incremental, state-led erosion via executive aggrandizement and strategic electoral manipulation (Bermeo, 2016; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018). Cross-national datasets (V-Dem; Freedom House) show a global "third wave of autocratization" characterized by declines in liberal-democracy indicators without outright authoritarian reversion (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

1.1.2. Polarization As Driver and Accelerator of Erosion

A growing body of work links pernicious polarization—deep affective and partisan enmity—to institutional decay. McCoy, Somer, and colleagues show how polarization redefines rivals as illegitimate, enabling rule-bending by incumbents and justifying extra-institutional tactics by opponents (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019). Experimental and observational studies indicate that polarized voters often tolerate norm violations by copartisans, weakening electoral punishment for would-be authoritarians (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Svobik, 2019). Reviews of affective polarization trace its identity-based roots and catalogue downstream consequences for democratic norms (Iyengar et al., 2019). V-Dem's recent reports integrate polarization indicators, associating high party hate-speech and political polarization with declines in the Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

1.1.3. Mechanisms: From “Menu of Manipulation” To “Stealth Authoritarianism”

The modalities through which elected rulers degrade competition are well theorized. Schedler’s typology catalogs pre-electoral and electoral-day interventions, including restrictions on opposition organization, media access, and vote choice (Schedler, 2006, 2013). Legal-institutional pathways have become especially salient: Varol (2015) conceptualizes stealth authoritarianism, whereby incumbents entrench power through facially legal, sub-constitutional measures (e.g., libel, campaign, or NGO laws) that reduce pluralism while maintaining a veneer of legality. In the judicial domain, courts in non-democracies often perform regime-stabilizing roles—policing opponents, arbitrating elite bargains, or legitimating executive moves—what Ginsburg and Moustafa (2008) term “rule by law” (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2008; Helmke & Rosenbluth, 2009). These insights inform analyses of contemporary lawfare, selective prosecutions, and regulatory controls over civil society and the digital sphere.

1.1.4. Pakistan’s Civil–Military Power Dynamics

Pakistan-focused scholarship locates democratic weakness in enduring tutelary civil–military relations. Shah (2014) traces the army’s institutional prerogatives and episodic interventions that structure civilian politics even during electoral periods; Siddiqi (2017) maps the military’s sprawling economic footprint and its implications for autonomy vis-à-vis elected governments. More recent work highlights an evolving judicial–military nexus: Kureshi (2022) explains how Pakistan’s higher judiciary has alternated between deference and confrontation, becoming an independent pole of power that can both constrain and enable executive or military strategies. These accounts converge on a picture of brokered competition, in which civilian alternation occurs within boundaries set (and periodically reset) by unelected actors.

1.1.5. Backsliding And Polarization in Pakistan (2008–2025): What the Reports Show

Comparative indices and rights reporting provide consistent event-level evidence for a narrowing civic and electoral space in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Freedom House characterizes Pakistan as holding

regular multiparty elections under heavy military influence, with recurring curbs on media and opposition; its 2025 country profile underscores persistent constraints and uneven rule of law (Freedom House, 2024, 2025). Around February 8, 2024, polls, rights groups and media reported pre-election engineering, a nationwide mobile/internet shutdown on election day, and a persistent block on X/Twitter from mid-February, later acknowledged by the Interior Ministry (Amnesty International, 2024a; Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024b). Freedom on the Net 2024 documents platform blocking and legislative proposals that chill online speech during the 2023–24 cycle (Freedom House, 2024–FOTN). These trends are consistent with V-Dem’s depiction of deepening autocratization and elevated polarization as risk multipliers.

1.1.6. Judicialization and Lawfare in Pakistan

The judicialization of politics—courts’ centrality in arbitrating high-stakes political conflict—has become a defining feature of Pakistan’s hybrid order. Kureshi (2022) shows how strategic litigation, disqualification cases, and suo motu powers have reallocated agenda-setting authority among courts, executives, and the military. In comparative perspective, such patterns reflect the dual nature of courts in non-consolidated democracies: they can serve as bulwarks for rights or as venues for selective enforcement against opponents (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2008; Helmke & Rosenbluth, 2009). Pakistan’s experience—with alternating waves of judicial activism and restraint—illustrates how legal tools can be instrumentalized within civil–military bargaining under conditions of intense partisan polarization.

1.1.7. Information Control, Media Environment, and Digital Repression

The media and digital spheres have become focal points of contention. Human Rights Watch’s 2024–2025 reporting describes sustained pressure on journalists, arrests under cybercrime and sedition provisions, and episodic disruptions that impede reporting and mobilization. Freedom on the Net 2024 similarly records growing executive capacity to restrict platforms and throttle networks, noting a pattern of security-framed justifications for time-bound shutdowns around protests and elections—an

archetypal form of “legal-tech” manipulation in hybrid regimes (HRW, 2024, 2025; Freedom House, 2024–FOTN). Event records from February–April 2024—election-day shutdowns and the X/Twitter block—offer salient examples of how information control intersects with electoral competition and post-electoral contestation.

1.1.8. What Is Distinct About Pakistan? Positioning Within the Comparative Debate

The comparative literature expects manipulation patterns to be conditioned by state capacity, incumbent-establishment alignment, and polarization (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). Pakistan fits the profile of a brokered, tutelary competitive authoritarian setting where overt electoral cancellation is rare but selective legalism, media/digital controls, and party-system engineering are common. Two features stand out: (1) the institutionalized prerogatives and economic reach of the military establishment, which shape cabinet formation and policy even amid alternation (Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2017); and (2) an increasingly empowered judiciary that can both counterbalance and complement military and executive aims (Kureshi, 2022). High polarization—documented in global work as corrosive of democratic guardrails—interacts with these constraints to reduce actors’ incentives for restraint, producing a polarization-backsliding spiral without regime rupture.

1.1.9. Gaps and Directions

Despite rich theorization, three gaps remain in Pakistan-focused scholarship. First, few studies jointly model civil-military bargaining and mass polarization to explain *where* manipulation occurs (courts vs. media vs. party regulation) in different alignments. Second, while flag indices decline, micro-level causal evidence linking specific interventions (e.g., platform blocks, symbol/ballot restrictions) to changes in turnout, monitoring, or seat shares remains sparse. Third, the literature under-specifies reform leverage points—how to restore a level playing field under tutelary conditions without inviting destabilizing confrontations. Addressing these gaps would align Pakistan studies with comparative advances on backsliding, stealth authoritarianism, and pernicious polarization.

1.2. Research Gap

Existing work richly theorizes hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, and Pakistan’s tutelary civil-military order, but it rarely integrates these strands with the burgeoning literature on pernicious polarization to explain *where* manipulation occurs inside an otherwise electoral system. Three gaps follow. First, we lack micro-causal evidence that connects specific instruments—judicial disqualifications and “lawfare,” party/ballot engineering, media pressure, and episodic digital shutdowns—to measurable shifts in contestation (turnout, monitoring capacity, seat margins) across the 2008–2025 period. Second, scholarship treats polarization as background context rather than a strategic variable shaping civil-military bargains and the choice of manipulation venue (courts vs. media vs. administration), leaving the polarization-backsliding spiral under-specified for Pakistan. Third, studies seldom exploit subnational variation (provincial rules, policing, media markets) or the military’s evolving economic governance role to illuminate how informal vetoes filter into everyday electoral competition. Addressing these gaps requires a framework that jointly models civil-military prerogatives and polarization dynamics, links event-level interventions to outcomes with longitudinal evidence, and identifies reform leverage points that can restore a level playing field without precipitating regime-destabilizing confrontations.

1.3. Research Methodology

1.3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, single-case design focused on Pakistan (2008–2025). The approach combines process tracing and document analysis to explain how civil-military bargaining and political polarization interact to produce democratic backsliding within a hybrid/competitive-authoritarian setting. The inquiry is explanatory, aiming to uncover mechanisms—such as party/ballot engineering, lawfare, media and digital controls—that link structural conditions to outcomes (erosion of fair competition and liberal guarantees). The case is intrinsically important for theory on tutelary democracies and instrumentally relevant for policy on electoral integrity and civil-military oversight.

1.3.2. Time Frame and Unit of Analysis

The temporal scope spans January 2008–August 2025, covering two alternations in power, the 18th Amendment, the 2018 transition, the 2022 no-confidence episode, and the 2024 general elections. The primary unit of analysis is the political discrete decision or event plausibly affecting the electoral level playing field—nested within the national case.

1.3.3. Sources of Evidence

Triangulation relies on primary and secondary materials.

Primary Sources (Official and Contemporaneous)

- **Constitutional and Legal Texts:** Constitution (as amended), Election Act 2017 and rules, PECA and related notifications.
- **Electoral Administration Records:** Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) press releases, codes of conduct, delimitation and symbol decisions, polling-day directives, Form-45/47 guidance, post-election statements.
- **Judicial Materials:** Supreme Court and High Court judgments, orders, cause lists, registrar notices concerning party qualification, disqualifications, election disputes, and media/digital regulation.
- **Executive/Agency Documents:** Interior Ministry and provincial Home Department notifications; Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) directives on platform blocking or network shutdowns; cabinet communiqués.
- **Parliamentary Materials:** Debates, committee reports, enacted amendments related to media, elections, and security.
- **Party Texts:** Manifestos, official statements, press-conference transcripts, coalition agreements.
- **Official Statistics/Records:** Turnout summaries, constituency results (descriptive context), and publicly released administrative datasets.

Secondary Sources (Analytical and Interpretive)

- **Peer-reviewed Scholarship** on hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, polarization, and Pakistan’s civil–military relations.
- **Think-Tank/NGO Reports** (e.g., V-Dem, Freedom House, International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) for event chronologies and rights assessments.
- **Reputable Media** (international and national) for contemporaneous reporting cross-checked against primary records and rights reports.
- **Authoritative Syntheses** (books/monographs) contextualizing institutional change and elite strategies.

1.3.4. Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

- **Purposive Sampling** identifies critical junctures (major legal amendments, pre-election rule changes, landmark court rulings, party bans/disqualifications, media regulatory shifts, network disruptions).
- **Inclusion Criteria:** documents must (a) directly concern electoral competition, civil liberties, or civil–military authority; (b) be dated and attributable to a recognized institution/outlet; and (c) contain sufficient detail to extract actions, actors, and justifications.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** opinion content lacking verifiable factual claims; duplicate reprints; materials without provenance.

- **Balance Rule:** each key episode is documented through **at least two** independent sources (e.g., official notification plus a court record or rights-group report) to mitigate single-source bias.

1.3.5. Data collection procedures

1. **Event Log Construction:** build a chronological database capturing date, actor(s), instrument (ordinance, injunction, administrative order, platform block), stated rationale, and immediate effects.

2. **Document Harvesting:** obtain PDFs or archived web pages of laws, judgments, notifications, ECP releases, and party texts; store with standardized filenames and metadata (title, date, source, URL).

3. **Cross-Verification:** corroborate each logged episode across at least two source categories (e.g., official notice and court filing; or ECP release and independent monitoring report).

4. **Data Management:** maintain an audit trail (search strings, repositories accessed, inclusion/exclusion decisions); tag materials for mechanism, actor, and time to facilitate retrieval.

1.3.6. Operationalization and Coding

A hybrid (deductive-inductive) codebook guides analysis.

- **Deductive Codes** (theory-driven):
 - **Mechanisms of manipulation:** party/ballot access, delimitation disputes, campaign/media regulation, lawfare (investigation/prosecution), information controls (platform blocks, throttling, shutdowns), administrative pressure (permits, rallies), office/resource abuse.
 - **Institutions/actors:** military/ISPR, ECP, courts (SC/HC), ministries/agencies, parties/coalitions, media regulators.
 - **Outcomes:** constraints on vertical accountability (voters' ability to choose/monitor) and horizontal accountability (checks among branches).
 - **Polarization markers:** delegitimizing rhetoric, hate-speech flags, boycott calls, refusal to accept adverse rulings, protest-repression cycles.

• **Inductive Codes** (emergent): novel frames such as “stability/anti-chaos” justifications, “national security” rationales for platform restrictions, or “anti-corruption” narratives for disqualifications. Coding proceeds in two passes: an initial open-coding round to refine categories, followed by focused coding using the stabilized scheme. If qualitative software (e.g., NVivo/Atlas.ti) is employed, code-frequency and co-occurrence matrices are exported to support the narrative synthesis; counts remain descriptive.

1.3.7. Analytic strategy

• **Within-Case Process Tracing:** sequence episodes to assess whether theorized mechanisms appear at plausible times and in coherent causal order (e.g., pre-election party/ballot engineering → campaign media restrictions → election-day information control → post-election litigation/lawfare).

• **Mechanism Testing:** classify observations as hoop, smoking-gun, or straw-in-the-wind tests for the proposed links among civil-military bargaining, polarization, and venue of manipulation (courts, media, administration).

• **Pattern Matching:** compare observed patterns with expectations from hybrid-regime and polarization literatures (e.g., whether high-salience contests attract more legal-bureaucratic interventions than routine races).

• **Triangulation:** corroborate claims across distinct source types (official/legal plus rights/media). Where accounts diverge, present competing narratives and evaluate credibility using proximity to events, institutional incentives, and documentary evidence.

1.3.8. Validity, Reliability, and Bias Mitigation

- **Credibility:** source triangulation; retention of original documents; precise citation of document IDs, dates, and issuing bodies.
- **Dependability:** maintain a versioned codebook with definitions and decision rules; memo all code changes; archive coding exports.
- **Confirmability:** keep a reflexive log noting prior assumptions and potential interpretive biases; incorporate adversarial reading of key sources.
- **Transferability:** provide thick institutional description to permit informed judgments about applicability to comparable tutelary systems.

1.3.9. Ethics and Research Positionality

The study relies primarily on public documentary materials. Any non-public or sensitive documents are handled under standard ethical norms (secure storage, de-identification where appropriate). If elite interviews are later incorporated as an extension,

procedures will include informed consent, confidentiality protection (role descriptors in place of names unless authorized), and compliance with relevant institutional review requirements. Researcher positionality is acknowledged: prior views on civil-military relations and polarization can shape interpretation; reflexive memos and structured challenges to emerging claims are used to minimize confirmation bias.

1.3.10. Limitations and Scope Conditions

- **Observational Equivalence:** certain legal actions may combine legitimate enforcement with strategic targeting. The design addresses this through timing analysis, selectivity checks, and multi-source corroboration.
- **Document Availability Bias:** opaque or classified processes limit certainty; analysis privileges well-documented episodes and annotates confidence levels.
- **Single-Case Design:** limits statistical generalization; the goal is mechanism-based inference and analytic generalization to similar tutelary democracies.

2. Data Analysis

2.1. Analytical Roadmap (Argument and Tests)

Core Claim. Pakistan's post-2008 trajectory reflects democratic backsliding *within* a hybrid or competitive-authoritarian order: elections remain periodic and meaningful, but the competitive field is narrowed through rule-bound yet strategically applied interventions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006, 2013). Two forces organize this pattern: (a) civil-military bargains that determine *where* intervention is most feasible and cost-effective (Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2017); and (b) political polarization that lowers restraint, raises payoffs for hardball, and supplies justifications for exceptional measures (McCoy & Somer, 2019; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). The roadmap translates this claim into propositions, mechanisms, observable implications, and disconfirming tests, with cumulative inference across sections (Bermeo, 2016; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018).

P1 — High Civil-Military Alignment Shifts Manipulation Toward Legal-Bureaucratic Venues

Causal Logic. When elected incumbents and the military establishment are broadly aligned, the state has less need for crude coercion. Legal-bureaucratic venues—courts, electoral administration, regulatory agencies, and routine executive orders—offer plausible deniability, lower international costs, and durable precedents that can be redeployed across cycles (Varol, 2015; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018). Alignment increases coordination capacity across these venues, enabling sequenced, low-visibility interventions that tilt competition while preserving formal procedures (Schedler, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Mechanisms.

- **Judicialization/Lawfare:** eligibility rulings, disqualifications, bail timing, and case acceleration or delay that change who can compete and when (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Varol, 2015).
- **Electoral Rule-Use:** delimitation disputes; party symbol/list decisions; codes of conduct and permit regimes that constrain rallies, canvassing, and finance (Schedler, 2006, 2013)
- **Regulatory Pressure:** media content advisories, licensing leverage, advertising guidelines, and fines framed as compliance (Freedom House, 2025).

Observable Implications. Interventions cluster in pre-election and immediately post-election windows with legalistic justifications (integrity, compliance, national security), rely on rule interpretation rather than fresh legislation, and display asymmetric effects across blocs while retaining neutral language (Schedler, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Disconfirming Evidence. High alignment accompanied primarily by street-level coercion rather than paperwork-driven constraints, or key episodes lacking documentary footprints, would weaken the claim (Bermeo, 2016).

Scope Notes. Where alignment loosens, legal-bureaucratic methods may still be attempted but produce more visible conflict and leakage, inviting alternative instruments described in P4's cumulative dynamic (Shah, 2014).

P2 – Rising Polarization Lowers Restraint and Intensifies Manipulation

Causal Logic. Polarization recasts rival as existential threats, shrinking space for cross-party bargains and socializing supporters to tolerate norm-breaking by allies (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). Prosecutors, regulators, and administrators anticipate partisan rewards and reputational protection for hardball; opposition actors escalate disruptive tactics, which furnish *public-order* rationales for constraints—propelling a spiral in which anticipated aggression justifies pre-emptive rule-bending (Graham & Svulik, 2020; Svulik, 2019).

Mechanisms.

- **Narrative Hardening:** delegitimizing frames in speeches, petitions, and televised talking points (McCoy & Somer, 2019).
- **Institutional Brinkmanship:** maximalist petitions, tit-for-tat contempt claims, sweeping “clean-up” crusades that normalize exceptional remedies (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018).
- **Administrative Reflexes:** frequent resort to prohibitory orders, rolling permit restrictions, or sudden venue cancellations (Freedom House, 2025).

Observable Implications. Rising hostility, boycott calls, and protest calendars accompany increased frequency and intensity of venue-based interventions; cross-party problem-solving declines as litigation substitutes for negotiation; selective enforcement becomes more pronounced (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Disconfirming Evidence. Sustained high polarization alongside stable or declining constraints, or robust cross-party bargains on electoral rules despite hostile rhetoric, would challenge the proposition (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Scope Notes. Effects vary with media structures and provincial political economies; plural media markets or broad coalitions may blunt the polarization-to-intervention channel (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

P3 – Information Controls Cluster Around High-Salience Junctures

Causal Logic. Control of information—broadcast content, platform reach, and network availability—directly affects mobilization, monitoring, and narrative dominance. Because returns to information control are time-dependent, authorities concentrate actions at campaign peaks, polling day, and post-results disputes, when even short disruptions can yield outsized effects (Freedom House, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025). The technique is modular: national or provincial shutdowns, platform-specific throttling or blocking, targeted takedowns, and editorial pressure on broadcasters (Amnesty International, 2024a, 2024b).

Mechanisms.

- **Network Interventions:** brief mobile/data shutdowns, throttling, DNS/IP blocking, and geofenced disruptions (Amnesty International, 2024a).
- **Platform Pressures:** content-takedown demands and account suspensions framed as misinformation control (Freedom House, 2024).
- **Broadcast Steering:** headline guidelines, off-limits topics, licensing or advertising leverage (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Observable Implications. Temporal clustering of disruptions with rallies, debates, counting, or mass protests; geographic patterning in hotspots; and justificatory notices citing security or integrity protection (Amnesty International, 2024a; Reuters, 2024).

Disconfirming Evidence. Major electoral junctures proceeding without measurable disruptions while similar constraints are imposed in low-salience periods, or interruptions tied to verified non-political causes with transparent restoration, would undercut the proposition (Freedom House, 2024).

Scope Notes. International costs encourage shorter durations, layered legal cover, and rapid normalization where scrutiny is intense (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

P4 – The Cumulative Effect Narrows Vertical and Horizontal Accountability Without Canceling Elections

Causal Logic. Propositions P1–P3 describe *venues* and *timing*; P4 captures the system-level consequence: over successive cycles, legal-bureaucratic interventions, polarization-driven hardball, and time-targeted information controls jointly degrade the level playing field while preserving electoral rituals (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Bermeo, 2016). This is backsliding by accretion, not rupture.

Vertical Accountability (voters → rulers). Information quality declines as media and digital controls reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints and real-time scrutiny; participation costs rise through uncertainty and last-minute administrative hurdles; effective choice narrows when disqualifications, symbol disputes, or campaign restrictions reshape who can viably compete (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Horizontal Accountability (Institutions Checking One Another). Electoral administration autonomy is strained by interpretations that consistently favor one side; judicial independence is pressured by case timing and expansive remedies with immediate political effects; parliamentary oversight weakens as security-linked domains migrate into executive or extra-parliamentary spaces (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Shah, 2014).

Observable Implications. Before/after comparisons show more restrictive codes, more high-stakes litigation, and more frequent communications interventions across cycles; behavioral adaptations include media self-censorship, civil-society caution, and parties investing more in courts than in grassroots persuasion; precedent accumulation reduces the need for ad hoc invention (Schedler, 2013; Freedom House, 2025).

Disconfirming Evidence. Liberalizing trends in rules and practices alongside continued elections, or constraints that are strictly symmetrical and promptly reversed by independent oversight, would challenge the claim (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Feedback and Path Dependence. Constraints generate loser's consent deficits, intensifying polarization and making the next round of hardball more likely; officials internalize risk-aversion and default to restrictive readings; security or economic shocks lower the political price of exceptional measures (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Bermeo, 2016).

Integrative Pathway

Taken together, the propositions describe a coherent pathway: alignment channels manipulation into legal-bureaucratic arenas (P1); polarization amplifies demand for and tolerance of such manipulation (P2); information controls are deployed at high-salience junctures for maximal effect (P3); and the cumulative result is narrowed vertical and horizontal accountability without suspending elections (P4). The pattern is consistent with contemporary theories of competitive authoritarianism and stealth authoritarianism and with recent documentary evidence on Pakistan's media/digital environment and civil-military prerogatives (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Varol, 2015; Freedom House, 2024, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024; Shah, 2014; Siddiqi, 2017).

2.2. Periodization & Baseline (2008–2017 · 2018–2022 · 2022–2025)

Purpose

This section fixes a baseline of constitutional rules, electoral administration, media/digital regulation, and civil-military prerogatives before and across the recent inflection in Pakistan's politics. Establishing these “starting rules of the game” permits later assessment of deviations that cumulatively narrow vertical and horizontal accountability while elections persist (International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

2008–2017 – Restoration and Rule Consolidation Constitutional Order. The Eighteenth Amendment (2010) re-parliamentarised the system by removing the president's unilateral dissolution power, expanded provincial autonomy by abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List, strengthened the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and NFC architecture, and renamed NWFP as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These provisions form the post-2008 baseline of devolved,

parliamentary governance against which later practice is judged (Constitution [Eighteenth Amendment] Act, 2010).

Electoral Administration. The Elections Act, 2017 consolidated dispersed election laws, codified the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) authorities over delimitation, symbols, codes of conduct, complaints, and results, and remains the master statute (as amended) structuring access to the ballot and administrative discretion (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2017/2023).

Media/Digital Regulation. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 created cyber-offences and—crucially—Section 37 empowered the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to remove or block online content. Subsequent Rules drafted under PECA sought to operationalize sweeping takedown powers; civil-society legal analyses flagged overbreadth and weak safeguards. The older Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act 1996 already gave the federal government and PTA broad policy and licensing levers, forming a pre-existing network-control substrate (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020; Article 19, 2012).

Civil-Military Prerogatives. Scholarship and monitoring during this period consistently describe a tutelary pattern: while electoral and parliamentary routines resumed, the military retained de facto prerogatives in national security and parts of foreign and economic policy—an informal veto environment shaping the bounds of civilian competition (Shah, 2014). To anchor this baseline with proximate documentation used later in the analysis, see also pre-election risk assessments emphasizing extra-electoral influence (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Interim Inference (2008–2017). By 2017, Pakistan had a devolved, parliamentary constitution; a consolidated electoral statute empowering the ECP; and a nascent but expandable digital-control toolkit (PECA + PTA). This is the reference frame for later episodes that rely more heavily on legal-bureaucratic and information-control instruments.

2018–2022 — Competitive Transfer, Institutional Innovation, and Fracture

Constitutional/Electoral Landmarks. General elections were conducted on 25 July 2018 under the 2017 framework; observation missions and ECP documentation provide the official baseline of procedures and outcomes (EU EOM, 2018; ECP, 2018). In the same year, the Twenty-Fifth Amendment merged FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a structural change to representation and administration completed through parliamentary supermajorities and presidential assent (Dawn, 2018; Al Jazeera, 2018).

Electoral Framework Adjustments. In May 2022, Parliament passed Elections (Amendment) Bill 2022, reversing the immediate nationwide rollout of EVMs and i-voting for overseas Pakistanis and instead authorizing pilot projects—an incremental approach that reinforced ECP discretion on high-risk technologies (Dawn, 2022; Radio Pakistan, 2022; see also IDEA, 2025).

Media/Digital Regulation in Practice. Draft and revised online harms rules under PECA (2020–2021) gestured toward stronger platform direction (local presence, takedown timelines, and data access), while rights groups and legal trackers warned of excessive discretion lodged in the PTA and federal executive (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020; C yRILLA, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Civil-Military Alignment and Subsequent Fracture. Early tenure exhibited high civil-military alignment, facilitating coordination across courts, regulators, and bureaucracy. The coalition unraveled in April 2022, when a no-confidence vote—restored by the Supreme Court after an attempted procedural block—removed the prime minister, spotlighting the system's reliance on parliamentary arithmetic and judicial umpiring during elite splits (Reuters, 2022).

Interim Inference (2018–2022). The period preserved the 2017/2016 formal baselines yet displayed their instrumental use: under alignment, interventions were channeled through rule-bound venues; when alignment fractured, conflict spilled

into high-stakes parliamentary and judicial confrontations.

2022–2025 — Contention, Tightened Information Controls, and the 2024 Stress Test

Constitutional/Electoral Landmarks. The ECP scheduled and conducted general elections on 8 February 2024 (ECP, 2023/2024). Election day saw a nationwide mobile/telecom shutdown; rights organizations and major outlets documented the disruption and its effects on participation and transparency (Amnesty International, 2024; *Time*, 2024).

Platform Restrictions. In April 2024, the Interior Ministry confirmed that access to X/Twitter had been blocked on national-security grounds, formalizing a de facto restriction in place since mid-February; subsequent reporting traced court challenges and political debate about the ban's legality and proportionality (Reuters, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; *Dawn*, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

Monitoring Snapshots. Cross-national monitors record a deterioration across 2024–2025 in media and electoral conditions: Freedom House downgraded

performance due to detention of key opposition figures, internet restrictions, and alleged manipulation; HRW described intermittent platform blocks and pressure on journalists; V-Dem's 2025 report situates Pakistan within broader autocratization trends (Freedom House, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Civil–Military Dynamics. Pre-election and post-election analyses emphasized the enduring salience of extra-electoral influence in structuring competition, coalition formation, and protest management—consistent with the hybrid/tutelar baseline set since 2008 (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Interim Inference (2022–2025). Formal constitutional and electoral baselines persist, but operationalization intensifies digital/network controls cluster at high-salience junctures; platform blocks, administrative rulings, and litigation pacing shape the competitive field. These practices constitute the immediate baseline for evaluating deviations from equal contestation going forward (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

Year/Date	Domain	Landmark/Instrument	Why it matters
2010	Constitution	Eighteenth Amendment	Re-parliamentarised system; abolished Concurrent List; strengthened devolution/CCI; renamed NWFP to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2016	Digital regulation	PECA 2016 (incl. Sec. 37)	Anchors state power to block/remove online content via PTA.
2017	Elections	Elections Act, 2017	Consolidates electoral law; codifies ECP powers and procedures.
July 25, 2018	Elections	General Election 2018	First national poll under 2017 statute; observation baselines established.
May 2018	Constitution	Twenty-Fifth Amendment	FATA–KP merger; adjusts representation/administration.
May 2022	Elections	Elections (Amendment) Bill 2022	Reverses immediate EVM/i-voting rollout; authorizes pilots.

Feb 8, 2024	Elections/Info	General Election 2024 + election-day shutdown	Salience-timed network disruption; core stress test of information controls.
Apr 17, 2024	Info policy	Interior Ministry confirms X/Twitter block	Prolonged platform restriction framed in national-security terms.

Table: Compact timeline of constitutional & electoral landmarks (baseline) (Constitution [Eighteenth Amendment] Act, 2010; ECP, 2017/2023; Digital Rights Foundation, 2020; EU EOM, 2018; Dawn, 2018; Radio Pakistan, 2022; ECP, 2023/2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Baseline Takeaway (Interim Inference)

Across 2008–2025, the formal rules—parliamentary devolution (2010), consolidated electoral law (2017)—remained in force. The operational landscape evolved toward venue-based manipulation (courts, election administration, regulatory decisions) and time-specific information controls (shutdowns, platform blocks) at electoral high points. Civil–military prerogatives continued to shape the *feasible set* of interventions, furnishing a hybrid regime baseline for subsequent analysis of backsliding without suspension of elections (International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; Shah, 2014).

2.3. Mechanism Test I — Pre-electoral Engineering of Competition

Framing the question. Pre-electoral engineering refers to rule changes and administrative decisions that shape who can realistically compete and under what conditions before a single ballot is cast. In Pakistan’s 2024 cycle, the focus falls on: (1) electoral codes and discretionary decisions of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP); (2) party symbol and list disputes that determine whether candidates run under a common banner and can claim reserved seats; (3) rally/permit and policing directives that constrain mobilization; (4) funding/advertising rules and practical media controls; and (5) delimitation controversies that affected timing and constituency boundaries. The analytic test is sequence and selectivity: *who* is affected, *when* relative to campaign milestones, and *with what formal justifications* (Bermeo, 2016; Schedler, 2013).

1) Codes, Notifications, and Discretionary Administration

The Elections Act, 2017 centralizes ECP authority over nominations, symbols, campaign conduct, and counting; its updated text codifies wide powers to issue codes of conduct and directions (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2023). Ahead of GE-2024, the Commission promulgated stakeholder-specific codes (e.g., security officials; national media) and a general code for parties/candidates that set limits on campaigning, advertising, and use of state resources, and mandated compliance with ECP directives (ECP, 2023; ECP, 2024a; ECP, 2024b). In principle, such codes are level-playing-field instruments. In practice, enforcement selectivity matters. Contemporary reporting documented instances of uneven application—for example, parties’ outdoor advertising and wall-chalking violations in Karachi—illustrating how ECP rules created compliance hooks usable against some actors more than others (Dawn, 2024a). The core baseline is clear: formal legal cover existed to discipline campaigns through written codes, and the ECP actively exercised that authority (ECP, 2023; 2024a; 2024b).

Sequence and Selectivity. Codes were issued before the intensive campaign phase (October 2023–January 2024) and operated throughout, enabling warnings, notices and local administrative action. Selectivity is suggested by heterogeneous local enforcement and by synergy with provincial/district orders discussed below (Dawn, 2024a; IFES, 2024).

2) Party Symbols, Lists, and the Downstream Effect on Reserved Seats

Symbol and list decisions were the most consequential pre-electoral levers. In January 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the ECP’s determination that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had not conducted intra-party elections in the legally compliant manner, thereby revoking the party’s common symbol (“bat”) (PLD 2024 SC 267; ECP, 2024c). Practically, this forced a

large cohort of candidates to contest as independents, fragmenting brand recognition and depriving the group of a unified party-list for post-election reserved seats (women/non-Muslims). After polls, when many of these independents affiliated with the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), the ECP ruled on March 4, 2024 that SIC was not entitled to reserved seats allocations because the affiliation occurred post-election and SIC had not submitted party lists in the prescribed manner—redistributing those seats to other parties in proportion to their returns (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2024b). Subsequent litigation continued through mid-2024, reflecting the strategic centrality of list eligibility to government formation (ISAS-NUS, 2024).

Sequence and selectivity. The symbol decision arrived weeks before polling day, altering the campaign environment at decisive moment; the reserved-seats decision followed immediately after results and directly influenced coalition arithmetic. Both decisions cited statutory compliance rationales (intra-party election mandates; list-submission rules), but their distributional impact fell heaviest on one bloc—consistent with a tilted but competitive arena (PLD 2024 SC 267; Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2024b).

3) Rally Permissions, Policing, and Assembly Restrictions

Campaign mobilization depended not only on ECP codes but also on provincial and district-level orders, notably Section 144 public-order bans and permit decisions—that constrained rallies and marches. In the fortnight before the vote, instances of denied or “unauthorized” events drew police action, including dispersal of PTL-linked gatherings in Karachi and related arrests, with authorities citing lack of permission and road blockages (Associated Press, 2024). UN human-rights spokespeople separately flagged a pattern of harassment and restrictions on the party’s campaign activity ahead of polling, urging authorities to ensure fair competition (Associated Press, 2023). Post-election, similar Section 144 bans continued to appear around sensitive anniversaries and protests, underscoring the administrative repertoire available to local governments (Dawn, 2025).

Sequence and selectivity. These orders tended to cluster near high-salience dates (late January–early February 2024) and around specific opposition mobilizations. Formal public-order justifications were invoked, yet the practical effect was to raise time and logistics costs for contenders, especially those already disadvantaged by symbol/list decisions (Associated Press, 2024; Associated Press, 2023).

4) Funding/Advertising Rules and Media Guidance

The Elections Act establishes campaign-finance rules and enables the Commission to issue media codes that, inter alia, regulate coverage norms and political advertising on broadcast outlets (ECP, 2023; International IDEA, 2023). The ECP’s Code of Conduct for National Media (October 2023) set content-integrity expectations and compliance duties under Article 218(3) and Section 233 (ECP, 2024b). Analysis in the business press warned in 2023 that amendments and enforcement gaps could widen resource asymmetries, in effect legalizing higher-spend campaigns in ways hard to police in real time (Dawn, 2023). While media codes aim at neutrality, practical leverage—licensing, compliance notices, and advertising flows—creates soft constraints that incumbents or aligned actors can navigate more easily than resource-constrained opponents (Dawn, 2023; ECP, 2024b).

Sequence and Selectivity. Media and spending rules were in effect throughout the campaign; selective salience emerges where outlets adjusted content to risk-avoidance and where enforcement affected visibility (airtime, ad placement) differentially across parties (IFES, 2024; Dawn, 2023).

5) Delimitation Controversies and the Timing of Elections

Following the Council of Common Interests’ endorsement of the 2023 census, the ECP launched a fresh delimitation that shifted the election timetable beyond the constitution’s 90-day dissolution window. Preliminary and final lists were published in October–November 2023, with corrections in December (Dawn, 2023; FAFEN, 2024). The process complied with the constitutional obligation to align seats with the latest census but recalibrated constituency boundaries and compressed campaign calendars in

some areas (Al Jazeera, 2023; FAFEN, 2024). Parties argued over the schedule's legality; nonetheless, the ECP's Form-7 finalized 266 National Assembly and 593 provincial constituencies for GE-2024, resolving objections within a truncated window (FAFEN, 2024).

Sequence and Selectivity. Delimitation occurred immediately before the election period, shaping campaign logistics and potential vote distributions. Although national scope, marginal seat changes and calendar compression can have asymmetric effects given uneven organizational capacity across parties (FAFEN, 2024; Dawn, 2023).

Interim Finding – A Tilted but Competitive Arena
Across these domains, formal legality and administrative discretion intersected in ways that tilted access to the ballot and campaign field without canceling competition. The decisive pre-election interventions were (a) the symbol/list axis (SC-affirmed ECP decision on PTI's symbol; post-poll reserved-seats ruling), which directly altered party coordination and legislative arithmetic, and (b) time-bound administrative controls (permits/Section 144; media codes), which raised mobilization and visibility costs at critical junctures (PLD 2024 SC 267; Reuters, 2024; Associated Press, 2024; ECP, 2024a, 2024b). Delimitation added a structural layer by changing boundaries and compressing calendars close to the vote (FAFEN, 2024; Dawn, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). The sequence—rules and rulings before polling day, followed by eligibility/list decisions immediately after—and their selective impact—falling most heavily on one bloc—are consistent with pre-electoral engineering in a hybrid setting: the level playing field narrows through legal-bureaucratic channels rather than overt bans, leaving elections formally intact but substantively unbalanced (Schedler, 2013; Bermeo, 2016).

2.4. Mechanism Test II – Judicialization and Lawfare

Framing the question. Judicialization and lawfare refer to the use of litigation, disqualifications, bail/appeal choreography, and prosecutorial pacing to selectively constrain political actors under a veneer of legality. In hybrid settings, courts and prosecutors can

become decisive venues through which access to the ballot, post-election arithmetic, and opposition capacity are shaped—often with timing that coincides with electoral milestones (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Kureshi, 2022; Varol, 2015).

A. Landmark Rulings That Re-Allocated Partisan Advantage

Party Symbol and Intra-Party Elections (Pre-Poll). On January 13, 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) finding that PTI's intra-party elections were not compliant with the Elections Act, thereby revoking the common electoral symbol ("bat"). This ruling fragmented candidate branding and forced a large cohort to contest as independents—an archetypal pre-poll constraint with profound downstream effects (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2024; PLD 2024 SC 267).

Reserved Seats (Post-Poll). On March 4, 2024, the ECP determined that the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC)—the post-election parliamentary home for many PTI-backed independents—was not entitled to reserved seats because it had not submitted pre-election party lists in the prescribed manner. The ruling redistributed women/minority seats to other parties, reshaping coalition math (Reuters, 2024). Subsequent litigation produced volatility: on July 12, 2024, the Supreme Court held PTI eligible for over 20 additional reserved seats; on June 27, 2025, a larger Constitutional Bench in review jurisdiction set aside the July 2024 judgment, reinstating the denial of reserved seats (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2025; Supreme Court short order, 2025). Together, these decisions show how judicial venue choice and sequencing can move pivotal legislative numbers without annulling elections. (Reuters, 2024, 2024; Dawn, 2025; Supreme Court, 2025).

Analytic Take-Away. The symbol ruling arrived weeks before polling day, altering campaign conditions; the reserved-seats rulings arrived immediately after results and then again a year later in review, re-allocating parliamentary resources at critical junctures. This is classic "smoking-gun" timing: legal moves proximate to milestones with asymmetric effects.

B. Disqualifications, Convictions, Acquittals, and Bail/Appeal Choreography

Cipher Case (State Secrets). A special court sentenced Imran Khan and former FM Shah Mahmood Qureshi to 10 years in January 2024. On June 3, 2024, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) acquitted both on appeal, vacating the convictions (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2024). Yet the opposition leader remained incarcerated in connection with other cases, illustrating how case portfolios can keep leaders immobilized even as individual charges collapse (AP, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

“Iddat/Unlawful Marriage” Case. A trial court imposed seven-year sentences in February 2024; by July 2024, an Islamabad court overturned the conviction, reflecting volatility in criminal outcomes and the importance of appeal pacing during and immediately after the electoral cycle (Reuters, 2024).

May 9 (2023) Protest Cases and Bail Timing. Through 2024–2025, bail decisions advanced unevenly, culminating in August 2025 when the Supreme Court accepted multiple bail pleas in May 9 cases while detention persisted in other matters—again illustrating how staggered bail can sustain constraints despite case-by-case relief (Dawn, 2025; *Times of India*, 2025).

Analytic Take-Away. The portfolio of cases, coupled with staggered bail/appeal outcomes, produced a net immobilization effect concentrated on one bloc. Timing is salient: convictions and detentions clustered around the campaign and post-results phases; major acquittals arrived after peak contention had passed.

C. Prosecutorial Pacing and Calendar Effects

Pacing Relative to Milestones. Charging decisions and hearing calendars accelerated around moments of heightened political salience. The symbol litigation crested just before polling; reserved-seats litigation peaked during government formation; and bail/acquittal orders gained momentum only months after the new Parliament was seated (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2025). From a lawfare perspective, this is the expected calendar logic: front-load legal risks to

constrain mobilization and coordination; back-load relief when it is less likely to alter power-sharing.

Asymmetry Across Blocs. Freedom House’s 2025 country report explicitly notes selective restrictions aimed at preventing PTI from converting electoral performance into a parliamentary majority, complementing the case-level record above (Freedom House, 2025). Human Rights Watch’s 2025 reporting similarly cites continued pressure on opposition and media in the post-election period, indicating a broader environmental tilt in which legal tools operate (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

D. “Smoking-Gun” Timing and Selectivity: What to Test in the Data

Smoking-gun timing. The data should show legal moves—symbol withdrawal; reserved-seats allocation/denial; bail denials; indictments—occurring proximate to: (i) campaign peaks, (ii) polling day/post-results disputes, and (iii) parliamentary seating/government formation windows. The symbol decision (Jan 13, 2024) is temporally close to the Feb 8 election; the ECP reserved seats ruling (Mar 4, 2024) and the SC review order (Jun 27, 2025) bracket the government formation and consolidation periods, respectively (ECP, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Supreme Court, 2025).

Selectivity. The target profile and distributional impact fall overwhelmingly on one political bloc: symbol loss, independent candidacies, ineligibility for reserved seats (first by ECP, later reaffirmed in review), and case portfolios that kept the bloc’s principal leader in custody beyond the campaign window (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2025; AP, 2024). This does not deny violations by other actors; it shows asymmetric legal salience concentrated on a single pole of competition.

Interim finding — Courts and prosecutors as decisive venues

Across symbol regulation, reserved-seat allocation, and criminal case portfolios, the venue of contestation shifted decisively to courts and prosecutors. The sequence—pre-poll symbol withdrawal; post-poll reserved-seat denial (followed by conflicting apex rulings and, finally, review); and staggered bail/appeal

outcomes—aligns with an engineering logic that narrows the level playing field without suspending elections (Schedler, 2013; Bermeo, 2016). The timing of key moves meets the “smoking-gun” test (proximate to electoral milestones), and the impact meets the asymmetry test (concentrated on one bloc). The pattern is therefore consistent with judicialization and lawfare as selective constraints in a hybrid regime.

2.5. Mechanism Test III – Information Controls (Media & Digital)

Framing the Question. Information controls encompass content restrictions, platform blocks, and network disruptions deployed at politically sensitive moments. In Pakistan’s recent cycles—especially the 2023–2025 window—these controls clustered around campaign peaks, polling day, and post-results disputes, and were justified with national security or public order rationales. The legal and administrative substrate comprises PECA 2016, Section 37 (content blocking/removal) and authorities under the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act 1996 leveraged to curtail connectivity; in broadcast, PEMRA circulars and advisories structured what could air and under what conditions (Article 19, 2012; Digital Rights Monitor, 2021; Freedom House, 2024).

Legal-Administrative Baseline (What Enables Information Control)

Digital Content and Platforms. Section 37 of PECA 2016 empowers the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to order removal or blocking of online content; the 2020/2021 Rules operationalized this authority in ways civil society and legal analysts criticized as overly broad (Digital Rights Monitor, 2021; C yRILLA, 2021; Freedom House, 2024). Platform-facing directives and data/local-presence demands increased the state’s leverage over social media ecosystems (Freedom House, 2024).

Network Shutdowns. Government practice has also relied on powers tied to the telecom statute to suspend or throttle services. While Pakistani courts have, at times, narrowly construed shutdown authority (e.g., IHC 2018), the policy routine of timed suspensions persisted (International Commission of Jurists commentary; IHRB, 2018; Oxford Human Rights Hub, 2020).

Broadcast Steering. On the media side, PEMRA notices and prohibitions—alongside the ECP Code of Conduct for National Media (Oct/Dec 2023)—created compliance “hooks” to discipline coverage during the campaign (ECP, 2023; Radio Pakistan, 2023). PEMRA’s record since 2023 includes episodic bans on airing certain political speeches and other editorial directives, illustrating broadcast-facing tools used during contentious periods (Dawn, 2023; AP, 2023; CPJ, 2023).

Analytic Implication. This framework predicts time-targeted actions around elections and protests, with written notifications or advisories citing security/integrity rationales, and measurable effects on mobilization, monitoring, and narrative control.

Event-Day Clustering at Electoral Stress Points (What Happened, When)

Election Day, 8 February 2024 (Nationwide Mobile/Data Shutdown). On polling day, authorities imposed a countrywide suspension of mobile services, disrupting communications during voting and counting. Rights groups condemned the move as a “reckless attack” on civic rights; major outlets documented the scale and timing; and network-measurement data detected wide-area outages (Amnesty International, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; Time, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024). The Interior Ministry referenced terror incidents as justification (Time, 2024).

Post-Poll Platform Block (X/Twitter). Beginning mid-February 2024, X (Twitter) became persistently inaccessible. On April 17, 2024, the Interior Ministry confirmed the block on national security grounds, formalizing a de facto restriction that digital rights groups had already flagged (Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024, civil-society joint statement). PTA later told a provincial high court that the ban followed Interior Ministry instructions, documenting the chain of command behind the platform restriction (Digital Rights Monitor, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024).

Provincial Proposals for Blanket Social-Media Suspensions. In July 2024, the Punjab government sought a six-day platform ban around Ashura, citing

security concerns—an example of planned geographically bounded but broad social-platform restrictions synchronized with a politically and socially sensitive calendar (Reuters, 2024).

Continuity with Earlier Clampdowns. The Freedom on the Net 2024 report reconstructs May 2023 as a four-day period of nationwide restrictions (following the arrest of a former prime minister) and documents repeated platform disruptions—establishing a pre-electoral pattern later reproduced in the 2024 cycle (Freedom House, 2024).

Analytic Implication. The timing aligns with the playbook expectation: pre- and post-election weeks saw platform constraints; polling day saw network shutdowns; and sensitive protest/commemoration windows saw proposed provincial-wide bans.

Breadth And Intensity (National Vs. Local; Full Shutdown Vs. Targeted Throttling)

National Scope. The February 8 shutdown was nationwide, affecting voters' ability to coordinate transport, verify information, and report irregularities; international press and monitoring organizations characterized it as unprecedented in scale on an election day (Amnesty International, 2024; Time, 2024). The X block likewise operated countrywide for months (Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024).

Local/Provincial Scope. Punjab's July 2024 proposal illustrates subnational deployment of platform restrictions; in other instances, geofenced throttling or service suspensions accompanied localized unrest or high-profile court appearances (Reuters, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

Targeting and Elasticity. By combining broadcast steering (PEMRA), digital content controls (PECA/Rules), and network management (PTA/Interior), authorities could modulate intensity—from takedowns and reduced reach to outright blackouts—tailored to event salience and anticipated mobilization (ECP, 2023; Dawn, 2023; Freedom House, 2024).

Stated Rationales and Documentary Footprint (How Actions Are Justified)

National Security / Public Order Frames. Official statements and notices linked shutdowns and platform blocks to terrorism threats, disinformation, and the need to protect electoral integrity. The Interior Ministry's confirmation of the X block explicitly cited national security; the election-day suspension was framed as a response to recent attacks (Reuters, 2024; Time, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024).

Regulatory Assistance Mandates. The ECP's Code of Conduct for National Media obliges PEMRA, PTA, and information wings to assist enforcement, creating formal inter-agency linkages that facilitate rapid actions (ECP, 2023). In litigation, PTA referenced Interior instructions regarding X, registering the administrative trail (Digital Rights Monitor, 2024).

Independent Verification. NetBlocks and other measurement groups supplied real-time telemetry that corroborated official actions and timelines, strengthening causal claims about event-day clustering (NetBlocks, 2024). Rights-group chronologies consolidated these observations into accessible records (Amnesty International, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

Analytic Test Results (Clustering, Breadth, Rationales)

Clustering. Controls spiked at peak salience: (i) polling day (Feb 8 shutdown), (ii) post-results dispute period (mid-Feb onward X block), and (iii) sensitive protest/commemoration windows (Punjab's July 2024 proposal)—matching the prediction that short, well-timed interventions deliver maximal political returns (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Breadth. The election-day blackout was nationwide; platform restrictions persisted countrywide; subnational authorities sought provincial bans when politically salient—demonstrating scalable deployment from local to national (Al Jazeera, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Rationales. Official security and integrity justifications appeared in Interior confirmations, ECP/PEMRA/PTA coordination clauses, and press

briefings—precisely the legalistic cover expected in a hybrid regime (ECP, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

Interim Finding — A Repeatable Information-Control Playbook

The evidence across notifications, advisories, newsroom accounts, measurement data, and rights chronology indicates a repeatable playbook linking information control to electoral contention:

1. Codify broad executive and regulatory latitude (PECA §37; telecom authorities; PEMRA rules).
2. Coordinate via ECP codes that explicitly enlist PEMRA/PTA to “assist” enforcement.
3. Deploy short-duration, wide-area shutdowns at polling or protest peaks to raise participation and monitoring costs.
4. Sustain platform restrictions (e.g., X ban) through Interior-PTA instructions during post-results bargaining, shaping the information environment as coalitions form.
5. Frame actions in national security / public order terms; restore partially after salience ebbs; repeat as needed.

This pattern narrows the informational foundations of vertical accountability—by reducing voters’ and observers’ ability to coordinate and verify in real time—while preserving formal electoral procedures, consistent with a hybrid competitive-authoritarian environment (Freedom House, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

2.6. Mechanism Test IV — Administrative/Coercive Pressure Short of Overt Repression

Framing the Question. The test asks whether bureaucratic and policing tools—permits/NOCs, Section 144 orders, venue withdrawals, observer-accreditation frictions, and short-term detentions/harassment—shaped mobilization (rallies, canvassing) and monitoring (observation, results oversight). In hybrid settings, these instruments operate as everyday state capacity that raises costs for some actors while nominally staying within law-and-order or procedural frames. The analytic criteria are (i) geographic concentration, (ii) actor targeting, and (iii) reversals after court intervention.

A) Advance Permissions, Section 144, And Venue Control

Permits and NOCs. In the fortnight before the 8 February 2024 polls, police repeatedly cited lack of NOC and “red zone” restrictions to disperse or block PTI-linked rallies, including in Karachi (tear gas, arrests) and across Punjab (crackdown to halt campaign caravans) (Associated Press, 2024; Dawn, 2024a, 2024b).

Section 144 as an Elastic Restraint. Authorities routinely invoked Section 144 CrPC (ban on assemblies) to pre-empt or chill mobilization—used episodically in late 2024 and again in early 2025 across Islamabad, Punjab, and Balochistan around opposition-announced protest dates (NDTV, 2024; Dawn, 2025; Arab News, 2025). While some orders cited security/traffic rationales or limited the ban’s scope (e.g., arms display in Peshawar), the operational effect was to condition rallies on administrative grace (Dawn, 2024c).

Venue Withdrawals and Cancellations. In May 2024, the Karachi administration twice refused PTI a permit to hold a rally at Bagh-e-Jinnah, prompting litigation and later Sindh High Court pushback (Pakistan Today, 2024; The Nation, 2024; Express Tribune, 2024; Dawn, 2024d). In Lahore, venue access at Minar-e-Pakistan became a recurring flashpoint (2024–2025), with authorities denying or tightly conditioning permissions and courts pressing the district administration to decide or justify prohibitions (Dawn, 2025a; The Express Tribune, 2025; Arab News, 2025).

Analytic Read-Out. Geographic concentration is apparent: denials and dispersals cluster in Karachi and Punjab/Lahore, while Section 144 becomes a reusable template in Islamabad and province-wide orders. Actor targeting shows salience for one bloc (PTI), as documented by newsroom accounts and court observations that discrimination likely occurred (Associated Press, 2024; Dawn, 2024a; Dawn, 2024d).

B) Observer Accreditation and Access to Counting/Tabulation

Formal Baseline (Access Rights). The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) issued SOPs for national/domestic observers for GE-2024 under

Section 238 of the Elections Act, authorizing observation “at polling stations [and] counting of votes,” and directing officials to facilitate observer access (ECP, 2023).

Observed Practice (Field Frictions). FAFEN’s Preliminary Election Observation Report (10 February 2024) recorded that although accreditation itself was “hassle-free,” 53 FAFEN observers were stopped from observing voting at 76 polling stations across multiple districts; crucially, 130 of 244 constituencies barred FAFEN observers from witnessing result tabulation at Returning Officers (RO) offices, despite ECP instructions. FAFEN also reported frequent non-provision of Form-45/46 copies to observers at polling stations (FAFEN, 2024, pp. 1–3). These restrictions directly impaired independent monitoring of the results aggregation stage (FAFEN, 2024).

Analytic Read-Out. The pattern satisfies monitoring interference without overt violence: the polling-station layer saw mixed but largely workable access, while upstream tabulation (RO offices) exhibited systematic denials across Punjab and Sindh in particular, precisely where small margins and seat-cluster effects matter most (FAFEN, 2024).

C) Detentions, Harassment, and Policing Choreography

Campaign-Period Policing. In late January 2024, police arrests and dispersals multiplied around PTI-affiliated canvassing (Karachi arrests; Punjab crackdowns), typically justified by NOC violations or traffic obstruction (Associated Press, 2024; Dawn, 2024a, 2024b). UN human-rights spokespeople, two days before polling, flagged a “pattern of harassment, arrests and prolonged detentions” of PTI leaders and activists—a signal that policing was being used as a selective constraint in the electoral window (OHCHR, 2024).

Broader Civic-Space Context. The US State Department’s 2024 Human Rights Report (released 2025) and HRCP commentary in May 2025 similarly catalogued pressure on opposition and civil space, noting that the 2024 polls were overshadowed by manipulation allegations and that protest rights

remained restricted (U.S. Department of State, 2025; Dawn, 2025b).

Analytic Read-Out. The actor-targeting criterion is met by concentration of detention and rally denials against a single opposition bloc, corroborated by international and domestic monitors noting discriminatory patterns (OHCHR, 2024; Dawn, 2024d).

D) Court Interventions and Partial Reversals

Judicial Pushback on Assembly Rights. The Sindh High Court (May 2024) observed that PTI was being denied the fundamental right to hold a public meeting, calling out apparent discrimination (Dawn, 2024d). In August 2024, the SHC ordered compliance with permission for a PTI rally at Bagh-e-Jinnah, after the administration failed to justify denial (Express Tribune, 2024). Lahore High Court orders in late 2024–early 2025 pressed the district administration to decide PTI applications and, at times, permissions were granted under strict conditions (Dawn, 2024e; Business Recorder, 2024; The Express Tribune, 2025).

Analytic Read-Out. These rulings satisfy the reversal criterion: constraints were partially rolled back by courts, but typically time-lagged and conditional, reflecting how administrative pressure works in real time, with legal relief arriving after mobilization windows.

Analytic Test – Putting the Pieces Together

Geographic Concentration. Administrative restraints clustered in Karachi (Bagh-e-Jinnah), Lahore (Minar-e-Pakistan), and Islamabad (Section 144), with Punjab showing repeated pre-emptive policing around caravans and sit-ins (Pakistan Today, 2024; Dawn, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a; NDTV, 2024).

Actor Targeting. Incidents disproportionately constrained PTI activities—denials of high-visibility venues, dispersal of rallies on NOC grounds, and episodic detention of candidates/activists—while other parties encountered fewer comparable obstacles in contemporaneous reporting (Associated Press, 2024; Dawn, 2024d).

Reversals After Court Intervention. High courts recognized rights violations and ordered permissions, but with delays or conditions that blunted immediate mobilization—showing how legal correction does not erase the temporal advantage administrative pressure confers (Express Tribune, 2024; Dawn, 2024e; Business Recorder, 2024).

Interim finding — Everyday State Capacity as a Lever

The cumulative record indicates a repeatable, low-visibility playbook: require advance permissions and NOCs; invoke Section 144 to throttle gatherings; deny or condition iconic venues; permit policing interventions that generate selective arrests; and constrain observation at pivotal tabulation stages, all while invoking administrative neutrality, security, or traffic management. Courts sometimes reverse or rebuke these measures, but the timing typically favors authorities: relief arrives after the peak mobilization window or with conditions that dilute effect. The result is shaped competition—mobilization and monitoring become costlier and less reliable for specific actors—consistent with administrative/coercive pressure short of overt repression in a hybrid regime. (Associated Press, 2024; FAFEN, 2024; OHCHR, 2024; Dawn, 2024a, 2024d).

2.7. Civil-Military Bargaining as the Organizer of Venues

Core Claim. Across Pakistan’s post-2008 trajectory, civil-military bargaining systematically organizes *where* manipulation tends to occur. When alignment between the elected leadership and the military establishment is high, the preferred venues skew legal-bureaucratic (courts, election rules, administration). When alignment fractures, authorities lean more on street-level administrative/coercive tools (permits, Section 144 orders, policing choreography) and information controls, even as elections proceed (International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2017).

2008–2017: Restoration With Tutelary Prerogatives; Venue = Legal-Bureaucratic

After the 2008 transition, the Eighteenth Amendment (2010) entrenched a devolved

parliamentary architecture, but a tutelary pattern persisted: the military retained *de facto* prerogatives on security and foreign policy even as elected governments alternated (Shah, 2014). Within this setting, judicialized contestation shaped partisan fortunes. The Supreme Court’s 2017 disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the Panama Papers case, followed by the Court’s 2018 ruling that Article 62(1)(f) disqualification is for life, illustrates a rule-of-law venue with outsized political consequences (Dawn, 2017; Dawn, 2018). The overall configuration—civilian rule bounded by military red lines—favored legal-bureaucratic levers over overt coercion, consistent with competitive-authoritarian practice that operates “by the book.” (Shah, 2014).

2018–2022: “Same-Page” Alignment Under PTI; Venue = Legal-Bureaucratic + Regulatory

With the PTI government’s early tenure, elite discourse emphasized a “same-page” alignment. Two institutional signals mattered. First, the National Development Council (2019) brought the COAS formally into an economic decision-making forum—an instance of expanded policy prerogative during alignment (Dawn, 2019). Second, in January 2020, across-the-aisle support delivered Army Act amendments to regularize extensions for service chiefs, reinforcing institutional bargaining power at a critical constitutional node (Dawn, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). During this phase, the preferred arenas for constraining rivals remained law-and-rule-centric—accountability/prosecution, regulatory notices, media codes—rather than mass coercion, while rights groups recorded intensifying pressure on opposition and media (HRW, 2020; HRW, 2021). This is the expected venue choice under high alignment: institutions and rules become the main instruments to shape competition.

2022–2025: Fracture and Re-Sorting; Venue = Mixed — Lawfare + Administrative/Coercive + Information Controls

The no-confidence removal of the PTI government in April 2022 marked a rupture. As the outgoing COAS publicly pledged an “apolitical” posture in late 2022, alignment with elected leadership became contingent and issue-specific (Dawn, 2022a; Dawn, 2022b; Al Jazeera, 2022). Meanwhile, the military’s policy

footprint widened in the economic domain via the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a high-powered forum in which the security establishment plays a sustained role—an indicator that prerogatives remained robust even amid proclaimed neutrality (Reuters, 2024a; Arab News, 2023). The hung-parliament outcome of 8 February 2024 and subsequent coalition formation (PML-N, PPP and allies) intersected with these prerogatives; contemporaneous reporting framed the new government's task as balancing policy choices with generals' preferences (Reuters, 2024b; Reuters, 2024c). In this fractured context, venue choice became mixed:

- **Lawfare/Legal-Bureaucratic:** Supreme Court-affirmed symbol withdrawal for PTI before polling and reserved-seats allocation battles after polling reallocated partisan advantage at decisive junctures.
- **Administrative/Coercive:** Section 144 orders, venue denials, and short-term detentions increased mobilization costs for one block.
- **Information Controls:** an election-day mobile shutdown and a month-long X/Twitter block constrained monitoring and coordination (International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

The mix reflects the expected venue shift under low or contested alignment: legal levers continue but are supplemented by street-level and information controls calibrated to electoral stress points.

Mechanism: How Alignment Organizes Venues

1. **Policy Prerogatives as Bargaining Power.** Enduring security-foreign policy prerogatives—and, since 2019–2024, economic-administrative roles via the NDC and SIFC—give the military agenda-setting capacity beyond constitutional texts (Dawn, 2019; Reuters, 2024a; Financial Times, 2025). When alignment is strong, these prerogatives enable *rule-guided* steering: intervention through the ECP, courts, and regulators is sufficient. Under fracture, prerogatives enable coordination of administrative and information controls that raise the cost of opposition mobilization while preserving formal process.

2. **Elite Signaling and Venue Choice.** Public statements by top brass matter as signals to lower bureaucracies and judges. Pledges of apolitical conduct (late-2022) coincided with visible deference to legal venues during the 2024 cycle (symbol/lists litigation, reserved-seats reviews); yet, when contention spiked, street-level and digital controls were also deployed, suggesting that neutrality claims do not preclude instrumental use of administrative capacity (Dawn, 2022a; Dawn, 2022b; International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

3. **Coalition Formation as a Venue Selector.** In hung parliaments, the marginal seat becomes pivotal. Venue choice then gravitates to post-poll mechanisms (e.g., reserved-seats allocation) and information controls that shape perceptions and coordination as coalitions form. Reporting from February–March 2024 shows rapid bargaining among PML-N, PPP, MQM-P and independents under intense scrutiny of the military's preferences and the SIFC-linked reform agenda (Reuters, 2024b; Reuters, 2024c).

Periodized Map of Alignment Vs. Venue (Summary)

- **2008–2017 (Low-Moderate Alignment; Tutelary Baseline):** Dominant venue legal-bureaucratic (e.g., Panama disqualification, 62(1)(f) lifetime rule), with the military's informal vetoes shaping the *outer bounds* of civilian competition (Dawn, 2017; Dawn, 2018; Shah, 2014).
- **2018–2021 (High Alignment):** Venue legal-bureaucratic/regulatory (electoral administration, accountability law, media rules), supported by institutional innovations like NDC and later Army Act amendments—interventions appear “by the rules,” with less need for overt coercion (Dawn, 2019; Dawn, 2020; HRW, 2020).
- **2022–2025 (Fracture/Mixed Alignment):** Venue mixed: lawfare (symbols, lists, reserved seats), administrative/coercive (Section 144, policing), and information controls (shutdowns, platform blocks), against a backdrop of apolitical rhetoric and SIFC-anchored prerogatives (Dawn, 2022a; Reuters, 2024a; International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

Inference: Alignment Predicts Venue Selection

Taking together, the periodization supports the study's venue-selection expectation. High alignment concentrates manipulation in legal-bureaucratic arenas (ECP rulings, court timelines, regulatory codes), while low alignment triggers supplementation with street-level administrative pressure and information controls—not as a substitute for elections, but to manage them. This dynamic coheres with comparative work on hybrid regimes: incumbents and aligned power centers prefer stealthier mechanisms that retain formal pluralism yet tilt competition (Varol, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

2.8. Polarization As Instrument and Outcome

Claim. Polarization has both instrumental and constitutive effects in Pakistan's hybrid setting parties deploy delegitimizing rhetoric and boycott/protest threats to justify hardball, while the resulting hostility reduces restraint across state organs, encouraging venue-based interventions (lawfare, administrative pressure, information controls) that then deepen enmity, producing a polarization-backsliding spiral. The scholarly baseline is clear: pernicious polarization erodes democratic norms and heightens tolerance for illiberal measures (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svoblik, 2019). V-Dem's 2025 report flags global increases in polarization and its correlation with disinformation and autocratization, with Pakistan situated in the set of countries exhibiting shrinking civic space and rising informational control (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Freedom House, 2025). (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svoblik, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2025; Freedom House, 2025).

Rhetoric and Delegitimation. Campaign and courtroom narratives—including allegations of "traitors," "foreign agents," and "judicial capture"—signal to supporters that opponents are existential threats, shrinking openings for cross-party bargains. Broadcast bans on airing specific political speeches and suspensions of channels (e.g., ARY) institutionalized this discursive hardening in 2023 (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2023). Such measures are readily framed as content standards but operate as filters that mute one pole of the conflict more than others (CPJ, 2023; Freedom House, 2025).

Boycott Calls and Protests/Repression Cycles.

Opposition threats of boycott or street mobilization before and after 8 February 2024 met with restrictive policing (permits/NOCs, Section 144, dispersals), while international rights monitors warned of arrests and harassment ahead of polling (OHCHR, 2024). These steps, presented as public-order management, in practice raise the mobilization cost for specific actors—amplifying perceptions of unfairness and further radicalizing rhetoric (OHCHR, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

Media Ecosystem Fragmentation and Information Controls.

Polarization interacts with a fragmented media system: PEMRA notices on coverage, election-period media codes, and platform/network restrictions (election-day shutdown; long-running X/Twitter block) structure what voters can see and when (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The temporal clustering of these measures at peak salience—campaign apex, polling, immediate post-results dispute—suggests a playbook shaped by polarization, where each side anticipates hostile narratives and the state responds with preemptive informational constraints (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Inference. Heightened enmity → reduced restraint (greater tolerance for bans, shutdowns, and selective prosecutions) → more frequent venue-based interventions, which then deepen enmity by signaling stacked rules. This spiral is consistent with theorized dynamics of pernicious polarization and stealthy manipulation in hybrid regimes (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Varol, 2015; V-Dem Institute, 2025). (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Varol, 2015; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

2.9. Process-Tracing Two Stress Tests (Causal Sequences)

A) 2018–2022 Sequence: From "Same-Page" Alignment to Fracture

Sequence. Early PTI tenure featured high alignment with the military establishment ("same page") and prominent signals of extended prerogatives (e.g., COAS on National Development Council; 2020 Army Act amendments regularizing tenure extensions) (Dawn, 2019; Dawn, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). Under alignment, the preferred venue leaned legal-bureaucratic and regulatory—emphasis on

accountability proceedings, media regulation and administrative rule-use rather than overt mass coercion (Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2021). Fracture followed in April 2022 with the no-confidence vote, reinstated by the Supreme Court after an attempted procedural block, and a new coalition took office (Reuters, 2024d). (Dawn, 2019; Dawn, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2021; Reuters, 2024d).

Mechanisms Observed.

1. **Legal-Bureaucratic Primacy Under Alignment** (2018–2021): “by-the-rules” tools—investigations, procedural hurdles, and regulatory pressure—dominated agenda-setting.

2. **Crisis Legalism at Fracture** (March–April 2022): constitutional litigation and parliamentary arithmetic decided executive continuity, not street-level repression, illustrating the *institutionalized* nature of contestation even amid rupture (Reuters, 2024d).

Accountability Effects. Horizontal checks (courts, ECP) acted as decisive arenas; vertical accountability narrowed indirectly via media pressure and selective enforcement but without systemic suspension of elections—consistent with competitive-authoritarian strategies (Freedom House, 2025).

B) 2022–2025 Sequence: Pre-Poll Engineering → Election-Day Information Control → Post-Poll Litigation and Coalition Bargaining

Step 1: Pre-Poll Engineering (Late 2023–Jan 2024). The Supreme Court’s January 13, 2024, order upholding the ECP’s withdrawal of PTI’s common symbol forced many candidates to run as independents, fracturing brand recognition and complicating list-based reserved seats (ECP, 2024; PLD 2024 SC 267). (ECP, 2024; PLD 2024 SC 267).

Step 2: Election Day Information Control (Feb 8, 2024). A nationwide mobile/data shutdown disrupted communications and monitoring; contemporaneous documentation by rights groups and network-measurement consortia captured the timing and breadth (Amnesty International, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024; Time, 2024). (Amnesty International, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024; Time, 2024).

Step 3: Post-Poll Litigation and Coalition Bargaining (Feb–Mar 2024 and Beyond). A prolonged block on X/Twitter during the bargaining window was confirmed by the Interior Ministry on April 17, 2024, while ECP ruled on March 4, 2024, that SIC (home to many PTI-backed independents) was not entitled to reserved seats, redistributing them to other parties (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Coalition negotiations produced a PML-N–PPP arrangement, reported under the shadow of enduring security-economic prerogatives (Reuters, 2024b, 2024c). Later judicial review in 2024–2025 created legal volatility but, in June 2025, the Supreme Court’s review restored the denial of reserved seats (Dawn, 2025). (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2024b; Reuters, 2024c; Dawn, 2025).

Plausibility. The sequence tightly aligns mechanisms with outcomes in real time: pre-poll legal decisions reshape campaign coordination; polling-day shutdown raises participation/monitoring costs; post-poll platform restriction and reserved-seats litigation determine narrative and arithmetic in government formation. This timing matches the “smoking-gun” criterion for venue-based manipulation under hybrid constraints (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

2.10. Subnational Variation and Disconfirming Evidence

Purpose and Approach. Subnational contrasts are crucial both to avoid monocausal stories and to identify boundary conditions. Three axes matter: (i) media market strength (Karachi/Lahore vs. smaller districts), (ii) policing/judicial behavior (provincial and district variation), and (iii) security environment (Balochistan/KP vs. Punjab/Sindh urban cores).

Observer Access and Tabulation Chokepoints. FAFEN’s preliminary report notes hassle-free accreditation overall but blocked access to voting at dozens of polling stations and, more systematically, to tabulation at RO offices across 130 of 244 constituencies, with concentration in Punjab and Sindh—a pattern that affects results verification precisely where margins are thin (FAFEN, 2024). This province-heavy obstruction of upstream aggregation serves as a non-violent yet consequential constraint on

horizontal and vertical accountability. (FAFEN, 2024).

Venue Permissions and Section 144 Usage. Karachi and Lahore emerged as flashpoints for venue denials (Bagh-e-Jinnah; Minare-e-Pakistan) and Section 144 orders, while courts in Sindh and Punjab later rebuked or partially reversed administrative prohibitions (Dawn, 2024–2025; The Express Tribune, 2024–2025). This indicates both localized overreach and the limits imposed by judicial review, albeit often after peak mobilization windows. (Dawn, 2024–2025; The Express Tribune, 2024–2025).

Security-Driven Exceptions. Authorities invoked credible security risks—e.g., deadly attacks on the eve of the polls—to justify extraordinary measures, including the polling-day shutdown (Time, 2024). Such episodes operate as disconfirming pressure against a simplistic manipulation narrative, since some restrictions reflect genuine threats. Yet the breadth and timing of nationwide measures (election-day blackout; months-long X block) exceed narrow tailoring, sustaining the inference of a repeatable playbook layered atop legitimate security concerns (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024). (Time, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Inference. Subnational variation shows most-likely sites (Punjab/Sindh urban cores) where administrative tools bite hardest and least-likely claims (genuinely volatile districts in Balochistan/KP) where restrictions have stronger security rationales. Acknowledging these exceptions strengthens the broader claim: many constraints are calibrated, not indiscriminate, and their asymmetry survives geographic parsing (FAFEN, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

2.11. Accountability Outcomes and the “Level-Playing-Field” Scorecard

Concept. The “level playing field” is the cumulative environment in which parties compete, and it turns on vertical accountability (voter information, turnout costs, monitoring) and horizontal accountability (ECP autonomy, judicial independence in electoral matters, parliamentary oversight). A qualitative scorecard maps episodes to shifts in these dimensions (Schedler,

2013; EU EOM, 2018). (Schedler, 2013; EU EOM, 2018).

Vertical Accountability (Voters → Rulers)

- **Information Environment.** Broadcast bans, election-period media codes, and platform/network restrictions narrowed real-time information and coordination. The Feb 8 blackout and months-long X block reduced citizen reporting and mobilization capacity during the most consequential windows (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Score: — (salience-timed contraction).

- **Turnout and Participation costs.** Permit denials, Section 144 orders, and policing increased the transaction cost of rallying and canvassing for targeted actors; short-term detentions had deterrent effects. Score: — (localized but consequential). (OHCHR, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

- **Monitoring and Verification.** Observer access to RO tabulation was often blocked, and Form-45/46 provision was inconsistent, weakening verification at the decisive aggregation stage (FAFEN, 2024). Score: — (systematic RO-level friction).

- **Effective Choice.** Symbol withdrawal and post-poll reserved-seats rulings reshaped viable party coordination and legislative representation. Score: — (pre-/post-poll legal filters). (ECP, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Horizontal Accountability (Institutions Checking One Another)

- **ECP Autonomy and Discretion.** Consolidated statutory powers enabled decisive pre-/post-poll rulings (symbols; reserved seats). Autonomy appeared robust in legal terms yet contested politically. Score: ± (strong formal role; contested impartiality). (ECP, 2024; EU EOM, 2018).

- **Judicial Independence in Electoral Matters.** Courts were decisive—affirming symbol withdrawal pre-poll; modulating reserved seats in 2024–2025 with conflicting judgments; providing bail/acquittal after peaking political moments. Independence was visible but outcomes often tracked political salience, consistent with judicialization under polarized

conditions. Score: $\pm$. (PLD 2024 SC 267; Dawn, 2025).

- **Parliamentary Oversight Over Security Sector.** SIFC and broader prerogatives indicated sustained extra-parliamentary influence; coalition governance faced hard constraints in security/economic domains. Score: $-$ (structural limits to oversight). (Reuters, 2024a; Freedom House, 2025).

Before/After Comparison (2008–2017 vs. 2022–2025). The formal constitutional baseline (Eighteenth Amendment; Elections Act) remains intact, but operational practices around pre-/post-poll legal filters, event-timed information controls, and administrative policing produce a steeper tilt than in 2008–2017 (EU EOM, 2018; Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

2.12. Synthesis: Tying Mechanisms to Propositions (P1–P4)

Cross-Mechanism Integration. The four mechanisms—pre-electoral engineering (symbols, lists, delimitation timing), lawfare/judicialization (disqualifications, bail/appeal pacing, reserved seats), information controls (shutdowns, platform blocks, broadcast steering), and administrative/coercive pressure short of overt repression (permits, Section 144, venue denials, observation frictions)—combine under civil–military bargaining. When alignment is high, interventions favor legal–bureaucratic and regulatory venues. When alignment fractures, authorities supplement legal tools with street-level and informational constraints. Polarization acts as the accelerant: delegitimation and protest cycles lower the reputational cost of extraordinary measures, encourage risk-averse bureaucracies to over-enforce, and normalize calendar-sensitive interventions (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Varol, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024). (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Varol, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Proposition Verdicts.

- **P1 (Alignment $\rightarrow$ Legal-Bureaucratic Venues):** Supported. 2018–2021 “same-page” dynamics correlate with by-the-rules constraints; even post-2022, peak interventions still begin in legal

venues (ECP rulings; apex-court timing). (Dawn, 2019; Dawn, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

- **P2 (Polarization $\rightarrow$ More Frequent/Intense Interventions):** Supported. Delegitimizing rhetoric, boycott threats, and protest/repression cycles coincide with denser interventions across 2023–2025 (CPJ, 2023; OHCHR, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

- **P3 (Information Controls Cluster at High-Salience Junctures):** Strongly supported. Election-day blackout and post-results X block match the predicted timing; proposals for provincial-level bans at sensitive moments confirm scalability (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

- **P4 (Cumulative Narrowing Without Suspending Elections):** Supported with caveats. Elections proceed, but vertical/horizontal accountability indicators decline information flow is constricted at critical moments; monitoring is blocked at RO offices; legal rulings re-allocate partisan advantage; parliamentary oversight remains bounded by prerogatives—yielding backsliding by accretion (EU EOM, 2018; FAFEN, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

Bottom Line. The Pakistan case fits a hybrid, competitive-authoritarian script: formal pluralism and periodic elections endure, but civil–military bargaining and polarization steer manipulation into repeatable venues that are legally framed, temporally targeted, and administratively enforced. The result is a tilted yet competitive arena, increasingly shaped by the calendar and venue selection rather than by outright regime rupture (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Varol, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025). (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Varol, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

2.13. Robustness and Alternative Explanations Approach and Source Triangulation

The inferences rest on multi-source convergence across (i) primary legal/administrative records (ECP codes and rulings; Supreme Court/High Court orders), (ii) rights-monitor chronologies (Amnesty, OHCHR, Freedom House, V-Dem), (iii) independent observation (FAFEN), (iv) third-party network telemetry (NetBlocks), and (v) cross-checked newsroom reporting (Reuters, Dawn, Al Jazeera, Time).

Election-day mobile shutdowns, for example, are corroborated by an Interior-linked policy justification (“security”), a rights-group condemnation, and measured service loss in real time (Reuters; Amnesty International; NetBlocks). Post-poll platform restrictions likewise combine an official acknowledgment (Interior Ministry), civil-society chronologies, and media verification. Judicial outcomes are documented by court and ECP archives and triangulated with independent reporting (*Dawn*, Reuters), while broad regime-trajectory assessments are anchored in Freedom House and V-Dem time-series. This triangulation mitigates single-source bias and supports claims about timing, breadth, and selectivity. (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024; FAFEN, 2024; *Dawn*, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Timing Sensitivity Checks

Mechanism claims hinge on “smoking-gun” timing—interventions proximate to campaign peaks, polling day, and post-results disputes. Sensitivity checks consider ± 7 –14-day windows around 8 February 2024. Within any such window, evidence shows: (a) pre-poll symbol litigation cresting on 13 January 2024; (b) polling-day nationwide mobile suspension on 8 February 2024; (c) post-poll reserved-seats allocation on 4 March 2024; and (d) the Interior Ministry’s confirmation of an X/Twitter block on 17 April 2024. A placebo test using non-salient weeks (e.g., mid-November 2023) would not display comparable nationwide connectivity or platform disruptions, supporting the interpretation that controls are event clustered. (ECP, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; *Time*, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Coding Alternatives and Measurement Error

To guard against classification bias, incidents are double-coded along two axes: (1) policy rationale (security, integrity, public order, or other) and (2) operative effect (legal-bureaucratic filter; information control; administrative/coercive constraint). A conservative coding scheme treats government-stated security rationales as *prima facie* valid unless breadth, duration, or geography substantially exceeds the immediate threat (e.g., nationwide blackout for localized attacks). A parallel scheme classifies observer-access frictions as monitoring constraints only when

occurring at RO tabulation stages rather than at ordinary polling-station access, reducing false positives. FAFEN’s dataset (blocked RO access in 130/244 constituencies) is probative under both strict and permissive coding. (FAFEN, 2024).

Rival Explanation 1 – Security Imperatives

The state cites authentic threats: twin bombings in Balochistan on 7 February 2024 killed more than two dozen people, and authorities announced a polling-day suspension to prevent further attacks. This security first narrative is credible and must be incorporated. The scope and timing, however, remain decisive. The measure was nationwide and coincided precisely with voting and counting, amplifying turnout and monitoring costs beyond the affected districts; moreover, an independent telemetry record confirms wide-area blackouts beyond any single incident’s locus. The pattern aligns with a dual-motive account: genuine threat + maximally broad instrument that predictably depresses real-time scrutiny. (*Time*, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024).

Rival Explanation 2 – Anti-Corruption Enforcement

Authorities frame disqualifications, convictions, and eligibility rulings as neutral rule-of-law actions. Two robustness checks apply. (a) **Reversals/Volatility.** Major cases were later overturned or acquitted (e.g., IHC acquittal in the cipher case on 3 June 2024), suggesting overreach or weak evidentiary grounding in at least part of the case portfolio. Timing of relief often post-dates peak electoral salience, indicating net immobilization during the decisive window. (*Dawn*, 2024). (b) **Distributional Impact.** The sequence—symbol withdrawal (Jan 13), independent candidacies, post-poll denial of reserved seats (Mar 4), and later oscillating apex-court outcomes—had asymmetric effects on one bloc’s ability to coordinate and translate votes into seats. The combination is consistent with lawfare rather than even-handed anti-corruption. (ECP, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Rival Explanation 3 – Spontaneous Market or Platform Outages

Two cross-checks reduce this risk. (i) Telemetry: NetBlocks recorded real-time, multi-region internet unavailability on 8 February 2024. (ii) Official confirmation: the Interior Ministry publicly confirmed blocking of X/Twitter on 17 April 2024 on national security grounds. Spontaneous, exogenous outages typically lack synchronous nationwide footprint and policy acknowledgment; these events display both. (NetBlocks, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Cross-Validation with Independent Observation and Global Indices

Observer data (FAFEN) document systematic RO-level tabulation barriers across Punjab/Sindh, even where polling-station access was “hassle-free,” isolating the chokepoint at the results-aggregation stage. Global monitors situate Pakistan’s 2024–2025 environment within a wider autocratization trend featuring selective civil-liberties constraints and military prerogatives in government formation. Convergence between micro-level incidents and macro indices supports the backsliding interpretation while acknowledging competitive electoral features remain. (FAFEN, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Timing Falsification and Placebo Tests

A timing falsification test examines whether equally broad shutdowns/blocks recur in non-electoral weeks without major protest triggers; available chronologies show concentration in campaign, polling, and post-results intervals. A placebo province test compares districts with similar security profiles but different administrative responses (e.g., venues approved vs. denied; RO access granted vs. barred). Where security risk is matched yet constraints diverge, the manipulation hypothesis gains plausibility. The Punjab/Sindh RO-access pattern versus more permissive districts functions as such a test case. (FAFEN, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Coding Stringency and “Least-Advantage” Interpretation

A least-advantage coding rule counts an episode as non-manipulative if equally consistent with neutral

enforcement. Under that stringent rule, results still indicate net tilt because the largest-magnitude interventions (symbol/lists; reserved seats; nationwide blackout; platform ban) produce predictable partisan asymmetries, even granting the stated rationales. This strengthens the conclusion that backsliding is accumulative and procedural rather than spectacular. (Varol, 2015; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Freedom House, 2025).

Disconfirming Evidence and Boundary Conditions

There are countervailing signals. July 12, 2024, Supreme Court judgment temporarily awarded reserved seats to PTI, showing meaningful judicial autonomy; later, June 27, 2025, review reversed that gain, illustrating volatility. High courts rebuked selective rally denials (e.g., Sindh High Court on Baghe-Jinnah), and observers reported hassle-free accreditation at many polling stations. Security incidents (e.g., Balochistan bombings) are genuine and justify some emergency measures. These caveats narrow the claim: the arena remains competitive; the tilt lies in venue choice and calendar targeting, not in election suspension. (Reuters, 2024; Dawn, 2025; FAFEN, 2024; Time, 2024).

Confidence Assessments (Mechanism-By-Mechanism)

- **Pre-Electoral Engineering (Symbols/Lists/Delimitation).** High confidence. The symbol ruling (Jan 13, 2024) and the reserved-seats decision (Mar 4, 2024) are documentary, high-salience, and proximate to milestones, with clear distributional effects on party coordination and parliamentary arithmetic. Sensitivity to alternative coding does not eliminate asymmetric impact. (ECP, 2024; Reuters, 2024).
- **Judicialization And Lawfare (Disqualifications/Bail/Appeal Pacing).** Medium-to-high confidence. Case portfolios and staggered relief (e.g., cipher acquittals after the campaign) indicate net immobilization during peak salience; however, conflicting apex-court outcomes (July 2024 vs. June 2025) counsel medium rather than maximal certainty about *direction* over time. (Dawn, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

• **Information Controls (Shutdowns/Platform Blocks/Broadcast Steering).** High confidence. Independent telemetry, official confirmation, and rights-group chronologies align on breadth, duration, and event clustering (Feb 8 shutdown; Feb–Apr X block). (NetBlocks, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024).

• **Administrative/Coercive Pressure Short of Overt Repression (Permits/Section 144/Observation).** Medium-to-high confidence. Repeated venue denials and Section 144 clusters around Karachi/Lahore/Islamabad, plus RO-access barriers recorded by FAFEN, indicate patterned constraints; localized security contexts create heterogeneity, so confidence is tempered by legitimate-order exceptions. (FAFEN, 2024; OHCHR, 2024; *Dawn*, 2024–2025)

3. Conclusion

This article has argued that Pakistan's post-2008 political trajectory exemplifies democratic backsliding within an electoral, hybrid regime, where elections continue but the level playing field narrows through instruments that are legalistic, timed, and selectively enforced. Mapping three periods—2008–2017, 2018–2022, and 2022–2025—shows how a devolved, parliamentary constitutional baseline and a consolidated electoral statute coexist with tutelary civil-military prerogatives that shape the feasible set of interventions (Shah, 2014). The core contribution is a venue-selection logic: when civil-military alignment is high, interventions gravitate toward legal-bureaucratic channels; when alignment fractures, those channels are supplemented by information controls and administrative/coercive tools short of mass repression. The result is a system that manages competition rather than suspends it, consistent with comparative accounts of competitive authoritarianism and stealth authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Varol, 2015; Schedler, 2013). Four linked findings emerge. First, pre-electoral engineering proved decisive. The Supreme Court-affirmed withdrawal of a major party's common symbol weeks before voting, followed by post-poll reserved-seats determinations, altered who could coordinate and how votes translate into seats, with effects concentrated on one bloc. These moves occurred at precisely the junctures when marginal

institutional shifts generate maximal returns—late campaign and government formation—matching the study's timing test for strategic intervention (Reuters, 2024). Second, judicialization and lawfare functioned as selective constraints. A portfolio of criminal and electoral cases, coupled with staggered bail and appeal relief, yielded a net immobilization effect during the high-salience window; reversals arrived after peak contention, underscoring how legality can be choreographed without abolishing competition (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Varol, 2015).

Third, information controls clustered at peak-salience moments. The nationwide mobile/data shutdown on polling day (8 February 2024) and a months-long block on X/Twitter—later formally acknowledged on national-security grounds—demonstrate a repeatable playbook: short, broad disruptions at voting and counting; sustained platform friction during post-results bargaining; and broadcast guidance to shape narrative salience (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024). These measures directly affect vertical accountability, by raising voters' coordination costs and blunting real-time observation, and indirectly affect horizontal accountability, by limiting scrutiny of administrative decisions at critical junctures (Freedom House, 2025). Fourth, administrative/coercive pressure short of overt repression—permit denials, Section 144 orders, venue cancellations, and chokepoints at results tabulation—elevated mobilization and monitoring costs for specific actors. Observation data document that access was often “hassle-free” at polling stations but blocked at Returning Officers' offices, precisely where verification matters most, indicating a targeted constraint rather than a blanket ban (FAFEN, 2024). The article also traced polarization as both instrument and outcome. Delegitimizing rhetoric, boycott threats, and protest-repression cycles lowered elite restraint, encouraged risk-averse bureaucratic over-enforcement, and normalized calendar-sensitive interventions. In turn, these interventions deepened enmity by signaling stacked rules, generating a polarization-backsliding spiral that resonates with comparative research on pernicious polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svobik, 2019). The two process-tracing sequences reinforce causal plausibility. From 2018 to 2022, a period of “same-page” alignment favored by-the-rules constraint; the 2022

fracture then produced a mixed repertoire—legal filters, administrative/coercive pressure, and information control—deployed in a tightly sequenced arc around the 2024 polls. Subnational analysis revealed geographic concentration (Karachi, Lahore, and key Punjab/Sindh constituencies) and judicial pushbacks that sometimes arrived too late to alter peak-window effects, clarifying the boundary conditions and tempering monocausal claims.

Robustness checks strengthen the inference. Triangulation across official notices, court records, observer data, independent network telemetry, and cross-checked newsroom reporting reduces single-source bias. Alternative explanations—notably genuine security threats—explain the decision to act in some instances, but not the calibrated breadth, timing, and persistence of nationwide measures, nor the asymmetric distribution of legal and administrative burdens. Spontaneous outages lack the documented policy trail and synchronized scope present on election day and in the X/Twitter case; even strict coding that credits government rationales leaves a residual pattern of event-clustered, venue-based constraints (Amnesty International, 2024; NetBlocks, 2024; Reuters, 2024; FAFEN, 2024).

Theoretically, the study refines accounts of hybrid regimes by specifying how civil-military bargaining organizes the choice of venue and when polarization accelerates the use of those venues. Rather than a single authoritarian “move,” Pakistan’s case illustrates backsliding by accretion: a chain of individually defensible actions that, in the aggregate, narrow vertical and horizontal accountability while leaving electoral rituals intact (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). Empirically, the level-playing-field scorecard shows consistent deterioration across information availability, participation costs, monitoring access, and institutional checks in 2023–2025 relative to the 2008–2017 baseline, aligning micro-episodes with macro trends reported by cross-national indices (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Normatively, the implications are straightforward: sustaining electoral competition requires insulating pre- and post-poll legal levers from partisan choreography, narrowing the scope for event-day connectivity restrictions, enforcing observer access to tabulation, and clarifying party-list/eligibility rules

well ahead of campaigns. Absent such guardrails, the expected path is continued hybridization—visible pluralism constrained by repeatable, time-targeted interventions. In summary, the evidence supports the article’s four propositions (P1–P4): alignment correlates with legal-bureaucratic constraints; polarization raises intervention frequency and intensity; information controls cluster at high-salience junctures; and the cumulative effect is backsliding without rupture. The pattern is analytically coherent, empirically triangulated, and robust to reasonable alternative explanations, warranting high confidence in the overall backsliding claim while recognizing pockets of judicial corrective action and genuine security exigencies that complicate, but do not overturn, the conclusion (International Crisis Group, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024; FAFEN, 2024).

4. References

- Al Jazeera. (2020, January 7). *Pakistan parliament passes army chief's tenure extension bills*.
- Al Jazeera. (2023, August 17). *Pakistan's election commission to carry out delimitation following census*.
- Al Jazeera. (2024, February 8). *Pakistan cuts mobile services on election day, cites security reasons*.
- Al Jazeera. (2024, February 19). *Pakistan confirms social media platform X has been blocked*.
- Amnesty International. (2024, February 8). *Pakistan: Mobile internet shutdown threatens to undermine election day*.
- Associated Press. (2025, February 7). *Pakistan hits back at criticism over pre-poll crackdown and communication blackout*.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2023, March 5). *Pakistan media regulator bans TV channels from broadcasting speeches by former PM Khan*.
- Digital Rights Foundation. (2020, November 19). *DRF is gravely concerned by the "Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2020"*.

- Digital Rights Monitor. (2021, January 22). *The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules, 2020 – Legal analysis*.
- Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). (2023/2024). *The Elections Act, 2017 (as modified up to 5 August 2023)* [Consolidated text]. Islamabad: ECP.
- Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). (2017/2023). *The Election Rules, 2017 (Updated till 31-12-2023)*. Islamabad: ECP.
- European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM). (2018). *Islamic Republic of Pakistan – Final report: General elections 25 July 2018*.
- Freedom House. (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024: Pakistan*.
- Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025: Pakistan*.
- Ginsburg, T., & Huq, A. Z. (2018). *How to save a constitutional democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ginsburg, T., & Moustafa, T. (Eds.). (2008). *Rule by law: The politics of courts in authoritarian regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>
- Helmke, G., & Rosenbluth, F. (2009). Regimes and the rule of law: Judicial independence in comparative perspective. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 345–366. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.040907.121521>
- Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Pakistan*.
- Human Rights Watch. (2025). *World Report 2025: Pakistan*.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- NetBlocks. (2024, February 8). *Internet disrupted in Pakistan on election day*.
- Pakistan. (2016). *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (Act XL of 2016)*. (Official text).
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2024). *Pakistan – Country profile (World Press Freedom Index 2024)*.
- Reuters. (2024, February 21). *U.S. calls on Pakistan to lift restrictions on internet and social media*.
- Reuters. (2024, April 17). *Pakistan confirms social media platform X is blocked*.
- Schedler, A. (2013). *The politics of uncertainty: Sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Siddiqi, A. (2017). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy* (2nd ed.). London: Pluto Press.
- Shah, A. (2014). *The army and democracy: Military politics in Pakistan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Svobik, M. W. (2019). Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(3), 20–32.
- Time. (2024, February 8). *Pakistan blocks mobile services on election day, citing security concerns*.
- Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. (2025). *Democracy report 2025*.