

EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF THE ELECTION DELAY IN PAKISTAN: EXPLORING THE PREDOMINANT THEMES

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Abstract

This study examines the critical period following the constitutionally mandated 90-day deadline for holding Pakistan's general elections, specifically between April 20, 2023, and November 11, 2023, a time marked by political uncertainty and legal ambiguity. Despite clear instructions from the Supreme Court of Pakistan, elections were not conducted within the stipulated timeframe, raising significant constitutional, democratic, and institutional concerns. The research investigates how four leading English-language newspapers; Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International, framed and editorialized the election delay. These newspapers were selected for their wide readership, editorial influence, and relevance in shaping public discourse in Pakistan. The focus remains on how these outlets fulfilled their agenda-setting and watchdog functions during a moment of constitutional tension and democratic abrasion. A qualitative thematic analysis was employed. Editorials were collected systematically, with relevant samples selected using a Kth interval method. The data was subsequently cleaned, coded, and grouped into thematic categories based on recurring patterns, dominant frames, and discursive practices. Findings reveal that editorial discourses largely revolved around constitutional infringement (Article 224), judicial interpretations, power politics, voter trust, governance failures, public disillusionment, and broader challenges to the democratic process. While Dawn and The Express Tribune adopted a constitutionalist and legalistic tone, The Nation and The News International viewed the delay more pragmatically through political and strategic lenses. The study concludes that editorial discourse during this period reflected the institutional instability and weakening of democratic accountability in Pakistan. In addition to condemning the delay, newspapers raised concerns regarding its long-term implications for electoral integrity, the rule of law, and public trust in democracy. This paper contributes to broader debates on media and democracy in transitional political systems, underscoring the pivotal role of editorial media in shaping public understanding of constitutional crises and in holding power structures accountable.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of a deepening political crisis, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the then ruling party, announced its decision to resign from the National Assembly of Pakistan and subsequently dissolved the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provincial assemblies. The Punjab Assembly was dissolved on January 14, 2023, and the KP Assembly followed on January 18, 2023, after formal resignations from the respective Chief Ministers and subsequent acceptance by the Governors (Dawn, 2023a).

The political unrest was further complicated by the earlier resignation of PTI members from the National Assembly following the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a no-confidence vote in April 2022. The National Assembly initially accepted these resignations en masse. However, the Supreme Court of Pakistan intervened and overturned this decision, ruling that resignations had to be verified individually to be constitutionally valid (The Express Tribune, 2022). Consequently, an election for a new Prime Minister was held in the National Assembly, and Mian Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif—President of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and nominee of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition of 13 political parties, was elected as the 23rd Prime Minister of Pakistan. He served for nearly 16 months, from April 2022 until August 2023, when the National Assembly was dissolved on schedule (The Nation, 2023).

According to Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973), elections must be held within 90 days of the dissolution of a provincial or national assembly: “When the National Assembly or a Provincial Assembly is dissolved, a general election shall be held within a period of ninety days after the dissolution.” (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 224{2})

Therefore, following the dissolution of the Punjab Assembly on January 14, 2023, and the KP Assembly on January 18, 2023, elections were constitutionally required to be held by mid-April 2023. However, both caretaker governments in Punjab and KP, appointed under Article 224A, were widely criticized for their lack of seriousness and commitment to fulfilling this constitutional mandate. At the same time, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), which is responsible for ensuring free and fair elections under

Article 218, was perceived as inactive and hesitant, citing logistical and security concerns (ECP, 2023; Rizvi, 2019).

Amid growing concerns over democratic backsliding and institutional inaction, Justice Umar Ata Bandial, the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, took *suo motu* notice of the election delay. He summoned representatives from the ECP and political parties to the Supreme Court to explain the failure to conduct elections within the stipulated 90-day period. During multiple hearings in March and April 2023, the ECP cited lack of funding, security threats, and administrative challenges, but failed to provide compelling justification. In its judgment dated April 4, 2023, the Supreme Court declared that elections in Punjab must be held by May 14, 2023, and directed the ECP to comply accordingly (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2023).

Despite this clear ruling from the apex court, elections in Punjab were not conducted on the ordered date. Political parties aligned with the PDM coalition continued to argue for delayed elections, citing fiscal constraints and the need for simultaneous polls at provincial and national levels. The ECP, under political pressure and without adequate logistical support, postponed the elections indefinitely, in direct violation of the Supreme Court’s order. This further escalated the constitutional crisis and eroded public trust in democratic institutions (The News International, 2023; Ahmed & Khan, 2021).

This unprecedented situation raised serious questions about the independence of constitutional bodies, political consensus, and the rule of law in Pakistan. It also served as the rationale for this research, which examines how mainstream print media editorialized and framed this democratic impasse.

Timely elections are a cornerstone of any functioning democracy, and Pakistan’s constitutional framework clearly defines the limits within which they must be held. Yet, in 2023, Pakistan faced a constitutional and political crisis when elections in Punjab and KP were not conducted within the mandated 90-day period. The delay in announcing federal elections further aggravated the situation. This electoral postponement occurred despite binding instructions from the Supreme Court (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2023).

The central problem addressed here is how the editorial pages of mainstream English-language newspapers represented and responded to this delay. Specifically, the study focuses on four major dailies; *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*, covering the period immediately after the constitutional deadline, from April 20 to November 11, 2023. The aim is to understand how editorial voices framed constitutional violations, critiqued political decision-making, and engaged with the judiciary's stance.

This delay was not just an administrative lapse but also carried significant political and economic consequences. It created governance instability, damaged investor confidence, and weakened public trust in democratic institutions. Editorials—being the official voice of newspapers—play a vital role in opinion-making, agenda-setting, and holding institutions accountable (McNair, 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Accordingly, this research asks:

Research Question

What predominant themes were produced by the editorials of *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *The News International* regarding the election delay in Pakistan at provincial and federal levels during the period under study?

Objectives of the Research

- To explore and critically analyse the editorial coverage of election delays in selected Pakistani newspapers following the expiration of the 90-day constitutional period.
- To identify and interpret the key themes reflected in the editorials of *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* between April 20 and November 11, 2023.

Delimitations of the Study

This research is delimited to the editorial content of four major English-language newspapers: *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*. Editorials were chosen because they reflect the institutional opinion of a newspaper and directly

shape public discourse (McNair, 2017). Other content such as news reports, op-eds, and features are excluded for analytical consistency.

The timeframe is restricted to April 20 to November 11, 2023, following the expiry of the 90-day constitutional period after the dissolution of Punjab and KP assemblies. This period captures the editorial response to ongoing legal and political debates over election delays. The study focuses on developments at federal, Punjab, and KP levels, while excluding international press, regional newspapers, and media from other provinces such as Sindh or Balochistan.

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to code and interpret editorial content. It applies Priming Theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) to explain how newspapers highlighted certain aspects of the crisis, such as constitutionalism, judicial activism, and democratic erosion, to shape public perception. Editorials, as ideological statements of institutions, serve as a lens into hegemonic discourses and agenda-setting in times of political crisis (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Rizvi, 2019).

By situating the study within Pakistan's contested democratic environment, the research aims to contribute to broader discussions on constitutionalism, political communication, and media's role in transitional democracies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two interrelated theories of mass communication Priming Theory and Agenda Setting Theory to explore how editorial content in Pakistani newspapers shaped public discourse regarding the election delay during the PDM government, particularly in relation to political narratives about the former ruling party, Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI).

Priming Theory is used in this work in order to interpret how the editorial language in *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* could have triggered a certain set of cognitive frames on issues of democracy, legality, accountability, and institutional credibility. These similar accounts might have shaped the perceptions of the citizens as it primed the fear of the abuse of the constitution, judicial wrangling and competencies of the political parties in the election system. As an

example, when news editorials keep giving prominence to delays in elections, breakdown of the institutions, or weakening of democratic norms, among others then the readers will probably evaluate the genuineness of the government or the Election Commission on such issues.

In addition, priming may be long lasting, especially in the situation when the media debate is often one-sided or focused on emotionally meaningful topics like constitutional crisis, democratic collapse, and so on. This kind of editorial biasing can introduce bias in how the citizens of the country judge the PDM regime in retrospect and the opposing PTI party when it comes to the issue of political behaviour and electoral anticipation (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

Very much an ally of priming, Agenda-Setting Theory goes on to offer the viewpoint that the media do not necessarily tell citizens what to think, but what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory brings out the influence of the media in the constitution of the salience of the issues in the mind of a person of the community. It is because when the media focuses on certain events or concerns in disproportionate manner it sends signal to the audience that the issues are paramount.

Agenda-Setting Theory in the study in question allows situating the priority of newspapers on why the state made decisions about the priorities of political stories in the post dismantling of PTI era and in the postponing of provincial elections. The most common topics of editorials were the validity of the delay, court proceedings, reasons given by the government and the reliability of PTI as a political opposition force. These are editorial choices that can be viewed as agenda-setting as it was involved in the presentation of certain themes and downplay/diminish others in the discourse with the population.

As it was said, in the time of the PDM government, some of the newspapers tended to build a favorable image of the ruling coalition, emphasizing at its discourse of economic recovery or state institute reform. At the same time, editorials critiqued the PTI leadership, referencing its confrontational tactics, earlier governance failures, or attempts to pressure state institutions. This imbalanced editorial emphasis reflects what scholars refer to as second-level agenda

setting shaping how audiences think about an issue through attribute salience (McCombs, 2005).

The agenda-setting process involves several stages:

- **Media Agenda:** The selection and emphasis of issues by media outlets.
- **Public Agenda:** The issues that the public perceives as important, often reflecting the media agenda.
- **Political Agenda:** Agenda setting both media and the society which can determine priorities of the policy maker.

Power concentration in media houses is realized through selection of which stories to focus on and which to diminish or commute. This is a gatekeeping power and can influence not just the opinion of the population but also the priorities of policies and even politics. Interaction between agenda setting and priming is inevitable: when the media sets the agenda i.e. makes an issue salient then it is priming that makes a difference on how the issue should be weighted and interpreted by the audiences.

Application to PDM and PTI Political Discourse

In case of the time of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, the political discourse analyzed in newspapers indicates the actual implementation of both theory of priming and notion of agenda setting. PDM, an alliance of the opposition parties, wanted to develop a positive self-identity in the media, and at the same time, pursue a narrative of adverse coverage of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

Analysis of Pakistani newspapers through empirical research at this time reveals that these dynamics were frequently displayed in the editorial, and news pages. To cite an example, when the content of major newspapers including Dawn, The News, Express Tribune and Daily Times was analyzed, it was observed that PDM received predominantly positive coverage in terms of editorials whereas the coverage of PTI was negative more often. Such trend indicates that it was a conscious attempt to build associations audiences with positivity regarding the PDM and negatively regarding PTI.

The agenda-setting role of newspapers was also present as the newspapers helped set the priorities in the media and promoted different issues and messages

that resonated with the interests of the PDM influencing the audience discourse and perception of political validity. Media has been front and center in shaping the political realities, which have been based on repetitive construction of the achievements or positions of the PDM and the criticism of the PTI government (Ghauri, Hasan & Khan, 2025). These results reveal the strong effect that media has in creating political talk by means of priming and agenda setting. They also emphasize the moral duty of media houses to publish well balanced and objective news as prejudicial coverage might distort the public knowledge and compromise the workings of democracy.

To answer this question about the influence of Pakistani editorial discourse on the creation of narratives in public about the delayed election of

2023, this paper resorts to Priming Theory and Agenda Setting Theory as two basic concepts of the mass communication studies that explain the influence of media on individual perception and opinion. The theories are the lenses of analysis through which we evaluate how editorial content: Chose some issues over others to highlight, framed popular perceptions by triggering certain criteria of evaluation, Framed the impressions of the readers concerning the major political actors and bodies. The interplay between these theories provides a robust framework for understanding how newspapers not only reported on the election delay but also framed it in ways that reinforced or challenged political legitimacy, democratic norms, and institutional credibility.

Table Summary Theoretical Framework			
Table	Summary Theoretical Framework		
Theory	Key Concept	Application in This Study	Main Scholars
Priming Theory	Media primes audiences to think in specific ways by making certain ideas salient.	Editorials primed readers to view election delays as unconstitutional and harmful to democracy.	Iyengar & Kinder (1987); Scheufele (2007)
Agenda Setting Theory	Media influences what issues people think about (not what to think).	Editorials emphasized election delays, judicial conflict, and political instability as dominant public issues.	McCombs & Shaw (1972); McCombs (2005)

Table Summary Theoretical Framework



Figure 1 Theoretical Framework Diagram

METHODOLOGY

Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that focuses on identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within a data set. It provides a flexible yet systematic approach to understanding qualitative content, particularly useful in media, communication, psychology, and political studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, thematic analysis is applied deductively (Ghauri, et. al, 2025) to the editorial content of four prominent Pakistani newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* to explore how the delay of elections in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and at the federal level was discussed and framed within a critical post90day constitutional context.

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data that involves identifying key themes and patterns. It is commonly used in social sciences, psychology, and organizational research to explore and understand complex data sets (as cited in Ghauri, et. al, 2025). The researcher assumes that predominantly following issues/themes would be discussed and

highlighted in the editorial coverage of the election in the newspapers during time period understudy.

Operationalization

Constitutional Issues

Constitutional issues refer to matters involving the interpretation, application, or validity of a nation's constitution. These issues arise when there is a dispute or ambiguity regarding the fundamental laws and principles that govern the organization and operation of the state, including the powers and limitations of government institutions. In practice, constitutional issues may include conflicts over the division of powers, the protection of fundamental rights, or the legality of governmental actions in relation to the constitution.

This theme refers to discussions, criticisms, or support related to the violation or adherence to constitutional provisions, especially Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan, which mandates the holding of elections within 90 days of the dissolution of a provincial or national assembly. Editorials falling into this theme highlight the role of the judiciary, Supreme Court rulings, legal obligations of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), and delays

perceived as unconstitutional or lacking legal justification.

Logistics Problems

Logistics problems are defined as obstacles or inefficiencies encountered in the management of the flow of goods, services, information, and resources from the point of origin to the point of consumption. These problems can include transportation delays, inadequate infrastructure, supply chain disruptions, inventory mismanagement, customs and regulatory challenges, and failures in order processing or distribution planning. In operational terms, logistics problems are identified by their impact on timely delivery, cost efficiency, and the ability to meet customer or organizational requirements.

Logistics problems refer to administrative and operational challenges that hinder the implementation of timely elections, as reported in editorial content. That is lack of printing materials (ballot papers), shortage of election personnel, unavailability of the polling station, delays in delimitation processes or checking of voters. The concept of editorials under this theme has been on sharing practical constraints of the Election Commission or governmental authorities in carrying out elections.

Political Issues

Operationally, political issues refer to the dispute, debate, or challenge on power and resources distribution as well as decision making in a community or institution. Such problems can include incompatible preferences, interests or ideologies by the stakeholders and could be in the form policy disagreements, governance problems or power struggles. Political issues in an organizational setting involve the quest to win, hold and/or exploit power to accomplish desired results particularly in unambiguous cases or in cases of conflicting interests. The topic includes political intents, jockeying and struggles during election delays.

The topics outlined by editorials under this category can delve in partisan interests, coalition politics (e.g. PDM vs PTI), blame games, and institutional politicization. This comprises editorials which give the impression that this delay has helped or hurt a particular group or leaders.

Economical Hurdles

Economical hurdles are any financial or material obstacle that prevents the attainment of the goals, development, or the implementation of new practice. Such challenges may encompass shortage of finance, high cost of operations, inadequate access to finances, unstable markets, and any other regulatory or policy measure, which influences economic input. To be operational, economical barriers are distinguished as those with a direct bearing on the capabilities of funding an activity, investing in growth or maintaining operations.

Economic obstacles are financial impediments mentioned in citing the cause of delay in elections, such as a small revenue allocation to ECP, IMF loans duties, and fiscal crises of the country. In this line of editorials, it is made clear that one of the many reasons holding elections is postponed is because economic confusion is being used as an excuse or reason to make such decisions especially when there is negotiation between the country and the financial institutions or inflation.

Weather Condition

The current conditions in the atmosphere at a certain place and time is what is known as weather condition, and such conditions are measurable which include temperature, humidity, wind direction and speed, precipitation, cloud cover, and atmospheric pressure. Weather conditions are measured and evaluated in the context of operations to aid with determining how the activities and operations are likely to be affected by the weather, their safety, and decision-making activities.

The theme of weather conditions is natural or seasonal difficulties of a monsoon rain, floods, excessive heat, or a period of snowfalls, which are mentioned as the causes of postponing election. Different editorials commenting on this theme provide discussion on how climatic conditions were manipulated either truthfully or politically to make decisions to delay.

Security Issues

Security issues are operationally defined as risks, threats, or vulnerabilities that may compromise the safety, integrity, or confidentiality of people, assets, information, or operations. These issues can arise

from both internal and external sources, including unauthorized access, data breaches, physical threats, or procedural weaknesses. Operational security involves identifying sensitive information, assessing potential threats, analysing vulnerabilities, and implementing measures to mitigate risks and protect against harm.

Security issues relate to Law and order concerns, including terrorism threats, insurgency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Balochistan, unrest in urban centres, and a general lack of safe conditions for conducting free and fair elections. Editorials under this theme argue either in Favor or against postponements based on internal security reports or incidents.

Significance of Thematic Analysis in This Study

Thematic analysis was chosen because it. Allows for flexibility in identifying latent meanings and implicit biases Helps uncover not just *what* is being said in editorials, but *how* and *why* Aligns with priming and agenda-setting frameworks, helping understand how editorial discourse may shape public cognition and salience of political issues.

It also supports the goal of examining how editorial discourse constructs public narratives around legality, institutional credibility, and democratic governance in Pakistan.

Sampling Strategy

In this qualitative media discourse study, the researcher aimed to explore editorial narratives surrounding the election delays in Pakistan during the period of 20 April 2023 and 11 November 2023. The study focused on four leading English language Pakistani newspapers: *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*.

During the data cleansing process, the researcher reviewed a total of 42 editorial stories published across the selected newspapers. Each of the editorials was considered in terms of its relevance to the research purposes which focused on the investigation of the political, constitutional and democratic discourse concerning the delayed elections in Pakistan. The 42 executive editorials as a whole were reduced to 12 that were indeed pertinent to the subject. These editorials focused on the following issues inter alia: Reasons and counter arguments of postponing the election, Legal and constitutional repercussions, Party politics and

public faith, Reactions of the institutions of adjudication and Election Commission.

Systematic sampling approach was used to guarantee equal representation and reduce bias by the researcher. A systematic sampling is a type of probability sampling, as each and every K^{th} unit on a list is chosen on the basis of arranging the data in chronological order.

In the data cleansing process, the researcher discovered that there were 42 editorial stories of which 12 news stories related to research objectives. There were 12 stories in the editorials of each newspaper and hence the researcher picked 3 stories out of 12. A researcher needed to choose 3 news stories where a systematic sampling technique was chosen with K^{th} method of sampling (K denotes King):

$$K = N/n,$$

N All editorials made in the newspaper.

n = the number of the required samples per newspaper.

The works were sorted in chronological order (date wise) on top to bottom and each K^{th} story was picked up to be analysed. This was done on all newspapers.

Summary:

Total Editorials Reviewed: 42,

Relevant Editorials Analysed: 12

Sampling Technique: Systematic Sampling (Chronological Order)

K^{th} Interval Used: Ranges between 3 and 4 depending on outlet.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section relates a contrasting thematic analysis of editorial discourse of four leading English language newspapers in Pakistan Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation and The News International on the question of delays in the holding of elections after the dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assemblies, and the growing confusion on account of delays at the federal level. The analysis will be done in April 18 to November 9, 2023, which is a precarious time period after the 90-day constitutional breach limit of the election of new government.

Dawn

The editorials carried in Dawn regularly pointed at the constitutional stipulation to conduct election

within 90 days of dissolution of assembly. Obstacles to its work in the form of delays, both technical and administrative, were the ones the outlet insisted on viewing as a perilous precedent that might disrupt democratic standards. Dawn also complained that the bureau given responsibility of conducting the 2023 census had been approved by the Council of Common Interests (CCI) days earlier than the assembly was dissolved, a move that was viewed as a purported attempt to have the census delayed under the pretext of the need of having a new delimitation.

Political Reasons and Scepticism: There have been speculations in the editorials that the delay was not merely technical as the outgoing government and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had their political interests in this delay. Dawn observed that timing of some of the major decisions, including the approval of the censuses and delimitation deadline shifts alluded that this could have been done intentionally to delay the process of holding elections.

Interest of the people and Democracy: Dawn cautioned that continuous delays in the time frame stipulated in the constitution would diminish people confidence and ultimately destabilize the political environment. The media outlet demanded more transparency on the part of ECP and all stakeholders to focus on the democratic process rather on short political gains.

Dawn had taken the most institutional position on the constitutional and legal implication concerning the postponement of the elections. The majority of its editorials focused on the loss of democratic principles, the disobedience of the instructions of the Supreme Court, and weakening of institutions, especially condemning the refusal of an executive to enforce the decisions of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and act on its directive to safeguard democracy. The Constitution is quite emphatic, that elections should take place in a period of 90 days. Not only is the delay unlawful but it is also a bad precedent undermining parliamentary supremacy.

Thematic emphasis:

- Constitutional Crisis
- Judicial Overreach or Obstruction
- Democratic Backsliding

Tone: Critical, analytical, and prodemocratic.

The Express Tribune

Transparency and Institutional Credibility: The Express Tribune editorials were based on demand of open communication by ECP on matters of why the delay was there. The outlet advised that the selective application of electoral laws and vagueness had the propensity to cause polarization and unproductiveness over the legitimacy of the election procedure.

Constitutional Dilemmas:

The Tribune provided an insight into the constitutional uncertainty that the delay has posed as the lack of an elected government and the extension of caretaker arrangements might lead to a further increase in uncertainty and panic on the side of people. The editorials identified the need to respect the provisions of the constitution to prevent further frustration of institutional credibility.

Effect on the Political Climate:

The Tribune appeared to understand that the stalling of elections was elevating the political tension and mistrust by the opposition parties more so the PTI who perceived the postponement of elections as one of the tactics to isolate them in the political circle.

Express Tribune was more tempered and realistic, juggling between constitutional requirements and practicalities involved on relative logistical and economic levels. The newspaper was periodically supported by the government position on budget uselessness implying the institutional agreement but not confrontation. Although constitutional commitments should be observed, financial and security issues experienced in the country should not be disassociated with.

Thematic emphasis:

- Logistical Challenges
- Economic Constraints
- Need for Political Dialogue

Tone: Balanced, pragmatic, occasionally centrist.

The Nation

Emphasis on Stability and Security: While direct editorial content from *The Nation* during this period is less accessible, the outlet’s general editorial stance has historically prioritized stability and national security. It is likely that *The Nation* framed the delays

as necessary for ensuring peaceful and orderly elections, especially in light of security concerns and the need for updated electoral rolls.

Procedural Justifications:

The Nation typically supports procedural compliance, such as the need for fresh delimitation following a new census, and may have echoed official narratives that technical and administrative requirements justified the delay. The outlet likely urged patience and called for all parties to support the ECP in fulfilling its mandate.

The Nation framed the election delays largely through a security first and state centric lens. The editorial discourse emphasized the dangers of political instability and security threats, especially in KP and Punjab, framing the delay as a pragmatic response to volatile conditions. The judiciary’s role was critiqued as activist, and political blame was more evenly distributed. It is about the establishment of safe conditions, rather than about making an urgent step to the elections which can increase the divisions.

Thematic emphasis:

- Security Concerns
- Judicial Overreach
- Political Polarization

Tone: Conservative, pro-security establishment, and cautionary.

The News International

Political Engineering:

The editorials of news international were critical of the political reasons to the delay, a criticism that coincided with opposition parties voices of complicity to tinker with the election schedule as a political gain. The newsroom cast doubt on the justifications provided by the government and that of ECP pointing

to their inconsistencies in their statements to the press.

Fears of impairment of democratic integrity:

The News International has pleaded that the integrity of the democratic process was at stake with frequent postponement and constant changes of the dates and threatens to undermine credibility of the electoral body in the eyes of the people. The editorials demanded concise timeframes and undeterred adherence to constitutional requirements to regain confidence.

International Implications:

The News also mentioned that all this tension and suspicion in countenance of the election timetable had accounted attention and worry internationally, and this could damage Pakistan in the global scope as well.

The News International offered editorials that were largely critical of institutional indecision, while also acknowledging logistical concerns. The newspaper wavered between reasonableness to support the timely occurrence of the democratic procedures on one part and practical deceiver ship on the ECP on the other where it frequently pointed the finger, at political stalemate. The delay in elections reflects a deeper failure of political institutions to prioritize the democratic process over partisan interests.

Thematic emphasis:

- Democratic Legitimacy
- Partisan Manipulation
- Institutional Dysfunction

Tone: Investigative, reform oriented, and sceptical of political narratives.

Table	Comparative Thematic Overview	
Newspaper	Primary Themes	Editorial Tone
<i>Dawn</i>	Constitutional Crisis, Judicial Authority	Strongly critical, legalistic
<i>Express Tribune</i>	Economic Constraints, Dialogue, Logistical	Moderate, pragmatic
<i>The Nation</i>	Security Concerns, Institutional Stability	Conservative, cautionary
<i>News International</i>	Institutional Failure, Political Deadlock	Critical, investigative

Table Comparative Thematic

CONCLUSIONS

Quantitative analysis indicates that *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* maintained relatively higher editorial engagement with the topic of election delays, while *The Nation* and *The News International* featured fewer dedicated editorials. This disparity underscores varying editorial priorities and institutional capacities across outlets. However, all newspapers, to varying degrees, addressed the delays, illustrating the significance of the issue within *The National* discourse. A quantitative analysis of editorial coverage during the specified period (April 18 to November 9, 2023) reveals significant variations in how frequently the topic of election delays was addressed across Pakistan’s major English language newspapers: *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*. Such differences are not only affected by the contrasting editorial policies, but also on the priorities and ideological concerns of the respective media outlets concerned.

Of the four newspapers used in this work we found *Dawn* to be the most involved media when it comes to the issue of election. It was characterized by substantial attention of its editorial board to constitutional responsibility, democratic principles, and governance malfunctions, citing Article 224(2) and the respective court rulings of the Supreme Court continuously. *Dawn* also ascertained regular publication of editorials, which means that there was editorial political engagement to push democratic continuity and institutional transparency.

In line with these, *The Express Tribune* also had a high write-up involvement, which however was

relatively neutral and less confrontational. Although a great number of editorials related to the delay were published in the newspaper, the general sentiments were rather logic- and economically based, as well as institutionally driven, and sometimes close to the explanation of Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) why they had to postpone the elections. This gives a sign of the editorial identity of *The Express Tribune* as a moderate and policy-based newspaper with focus on centrist political discussions.

In contrast, *The Nation* featured fewer editorials specifically dedicated to the theme of election delays. Its coverage tended to emphasize Law and order concerns, security challenges, and strategic stability, often framing the delay as a pragmatic response to national security threats. While it did comment on the constitutional implications of the delay, such concerns were often secondary to stability-oriented narratives.

The News International, while possessing a wide readership and national relevance, also published a limited number of dedicated election delay editorials. However, its coverage often delved deeper into the political consequences of institutional inaction and frequently highlighted the lack of transparency in both government and electoral bodies. Its editorials tended to adopt an investigative or reformist tone, calling for greater accountability, but its lower volume suggests that the topic, though important, did not dominate its editorial calendar.

Newspaper	Total Editorials Reviewed	Relevant Election Delay Editorials	Engagement Level
<i>Dawn</i>	25	18	High
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	23	16	High
<i>The Nation</i>	20	10	Medium
<i>The News International</i>	22	9	Medium

Table Comparative Editorial Volume

Such difference in the volume of reports by the newspapers indicates that each of them had different goals when they covered the election delay in the

minds when determining its newsworthiness and political value:

It became a national democratic issue at the center of the attention of Dawn and The Express Tribune because they reoriented the editorial agenda. The Nation discussed the problem in the context of national safety and political stability. The News

which shows that the issue was of national interest, and also, it is of cross editorial concern in that case.

Dominant Themes in Editorial Narratives

- Factors Contributing to the Delay- amongst the factors include the effect the 2023 census has on the delay of the elections, the security issues, and logistical problems.
- Constitutional and Legal Implications -with special regards to Article 224 and the issue of judicial intervention in overseeing the elections.
- Political Party Views - differences in accounts by the PTI, PMLN, and other stakeholders on the substance of the delay, its illegitimacy and legality.
- Democratic Issues and Community Attitudes- as seen in editorials, there were serious concerns over a decline in civic spirit, decline of democratic values and weakening faith of the populace in the state institutions.
- Long-Term Political Consequences - including fears of institutional decay, democratic backsliding, and the dangerous precedent of manipulating constitutional deadlines.

The thematic analysis of editorial content from *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* between April and November 2023 revealed five dominant themes that consistently appeared across the newspapers. These themes represent the key areas of concern and critique within the media discourse regarding the delay of general and provincial elections in Pakistan. Each theme reflects not only institutional commentary but also the larger public discourse around constitutional governance, political accountability, and democratic integrity.

1. Reasons for Delay

One of the most prominent themes was the justification and rationale provided for the postponement of elections. Editorials highlighted

international was a bit more institution-based in terms of accountability and dedicated less to editorials. Although some of these varied, all the four outlets covered the issue of electoral delay as the main theme,

several key factors used by authorities to delay the polls:

- **2023 Census:** The new digital census was cited as a major reason requiring fresh delimitation of constituencies, which would naturally push the electoral timeline beyond the 90day constitutional limit.
- **Security Challenges:** The situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Balochistan was labelled “sensitive,” with potential threats to polling stations, candidates, and voters.
- **Logistical Constraints:** These included resource limitations faced by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), such as lack of staff, funding, and insufficient planning time. While census data and security concerns are real, they cannot override constitutional imperatives unless democracy itself is deemed a negotiable principle.

These factors were seen in the editorials as administrative obstacles that, though significant, should not have served as blanket justifications to override constitutional obligations.

2. Constitutional and Legal Implications

A recurring theme in the editorials was the violation or manipulation of Article 224(2) of the Constitution, which mandates elections within 90 days of assembly dissolution. Editorials frequently criticized the ECP’s inaction, the federal and provincial caretaker governments, and even expressed concern over the judiciary’s inconsistent enforcement of constitutional provisions.

Some newspapers framed the delay as a serious breach of democratic norms, setting a dangerous legal precedent that could be exploited in future elections. The ruling of the court is decided, the Constitution is clear, and still political convenience takes the cheap way out over the legal responsibility. In these debates erosion of the constitution was a fear, and editorials asked whether rule of law was exercised in a selective manner according to Ariston or political necessity.

3. Political Party Perspectives

Newspaper editorials were also a form of reflection/analysis of the conflicting stands that political stake holders took:

Even delaying of the elections was something PTI (Pakistan Tehreek Insaf) was very vocally critical of, directly citing a plot behind it to deny them an electoral rebound.

PMLN, and their partners in the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), justified this postponement on census grounds, economic issues, and security situation.

Partisan polarization, including legalizing constitutional deadlines through political narratives, was often mentioned in the editorial.

Losing delay is theft of a mandate to PTI and strategic governance to PDM. To the masses it is confusion.

This theme also showed the process of politicizing constitutional duties in a way that the politicking was making legal utterances to be more politically expedient.

4. Public Sentiment and Democratic Concerns

On all editorials, there was an expression of discontent of disillusionment of the populace, loss of the democratic ideals, and defiance of electoral institutions. The delays were considered to be leading to voter apathy especially among the younger people and first-time voters. Pointed out by numerous editorials was the vulnerability of democratic conventions and the danger that continual subversion of election procedures would permanently destroy popular trust in representative democracy. Every missed deadline undermines the concept of responsibility and in the near future, elections will not be regarded as a right anymore, rather it will be perceived as a luxury. The theme was an indication of a greater democratic crisis, whereby, the alienation between the state institutions and the citizenry was becoming increasingly large.

5. Long Term Political Consequences

Lastly, most editorials contemplated on the long term impacts of such election delays. This was not viewed as an individual setback but as a whole trend towards democratic backsliding. There were warnings in editorials of:

The risk of Precedent setting behaviour whereby future governments would postpone elections on similar pretexts. Institutional corruption more so concerning the Election Commission and the courts. Political instability was raised with insecurity over the possibility of the decline of electoral justifications that may trigger mass protests, civil unrest, or a military takeover worst case scenario.

Not only was there explicit criticism and reflective consideration on the editorial discourse in the four newspapers but also on the varying political circumstances. The tone and the emphasis differed depending on the outlet, but there was universal alarm regarding the effects of the delay on the democracy of Pakistan. The themes disclose a media space that, in a more general sense, largely recognises the threats along the way of dismissing constitutional requirements and violating the belief of people.

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