

Power and Paradox: PTI's Contentious Engagement with Pakistan's Institutional Pillars (2018–2022)

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Abstract

For decades, Pakistan's political dynamics have been shaped by the relationship between the elected civilian government and the state's other institutions, a cornerstone of the country's political direction. The struggle for political dominance among various entities has also impacted political parties' policies. The most contemporary circumstance of such a battle is the case of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which emerged as a populist force under Imran Khan's leadership in 2018, but its clash with the state's institutions erupted in 2022. PTI initially benefitted from the state's institutional patronage, gaining credibility and influence. However, this relationship was strained by policy failures, including economic difficulties and other governance issues, which caused the institutions to withdraw their support, contributing to PTI's decline. This research explores the PTI's track, focusing on the challenges of maintaining civilian government and the reliance on institutional and bureaucratic support. Adopting a descriptive approach of the qualitative method, the study draws on theories of civil-military relations and populism to evaluate tensions underlying PTI's shifting trajectory and analyse the contributing elements to PTI's ascent and subsequent decline. Authors of this article examined wider ramifications for Pakistan's political stability and democratic processes and analysed the discrepancies between PTI's political strategies, governance outcomes, and the institutions' changing priorities based on national interest. The study ensures diverse insights into PTI's relationship with the state's institutions and the broader political landscape.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-PTI, Military Establishment, Evolutionary Dynamics, Institutional Pillars

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape had been shaped by complex dynamics between civilian governance and military influence. From the time it came since its existence in 1947, the nation has experienced various direct and indirect military engagements in political affairs that have impacted significantly the direction of democratic systems and political parties. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was established by a former

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cricketer, Imran Khan in 1996. PTI had arisen as a populist force against the deep political elites and corruption in the country (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). After initially failing to gain electoral achievements, PTI's prospects turned around after supposedly receiving military support, which led to a historic win in the 2018 general parliamentary elections (Shah, 2019). However, by 2022, the party's supposedly relationship partnership with the military had broken down due to issues with implementation of the policies related to the governance, unstable economic conditions, and changing institutional objectives (Nawaz, 2024). The military support to the civilian government in Pakistan has long been a defining feature of the country's civil-military ties, as the apparently military's back in the political administration has existed since the nation's independence.

Some of the scholars assert, many political incidents in the history of Pakistan prove that the military frequently displaced civilian rulers through direct coups or covert political manoeuvring (Rizvi, 2009). It's a reality of the country's political record that in order to gain acceptability and electoral success for accessing power corridors, the country's political parties often align with the military. According to a section of literature, in the case of PTI, it was primarily an anti-establishment party, but later, it progressively allied with the military, taking advantage of its leader's emerging popularity in the political moves (Shah, 2019). While considering claims of political favouritism and electoral manipulation that indicated a significant military role in PTI's rise, this support was essential to the party's electoral victory in 2018 (Nawaz, 2024). The PTI gained the military's favour by accusing major political parties of corruption and dishonesty. The party first won a significant victory in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and held an advancement in the central parliament in the 2013 elections, and then achieved a major victory in the 2018 elections, emerging as the largest political party.

By attaining significant successes in combined with possessing purportedly military support, PTI emerged as a largest political party across the country and formed governments in the centre and Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, but it faced major challenges in governance. The challenges were characterized as economic problems, rapid inflation, governance crises, and mishandled policies against opposition. Initially, the Prime Minister Imran Khan led government had struggled to address inflation, rising debt, and unemployment, but faced difficulties in accomplishing the goals, which eroded the party's credibility both among the institutional and public circles (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). Additionally, PTI's inability to manage differences with the military establishment due to its confrontational approach on various policies had further weakened the relationship with the military. Following the removal of supposedly military assistance in 2022, PTI's political vulnerability resulted in its overthrow and subsequent battle to stay in power (Nawaz, 2024). The PTI government was forced out of power in 2022 through a no-confidence motion, and its fight with the military intensified thereafter. This paper covers the

events from 2018 to 2022, examining how the PTI came to power, what the party's relationship was with the military, and then how differences erupted between the party and the military. The study encompasses the origins of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its rise, PTI's governance approach and policy priorities, accountability measures, and opposition's concerns, PTI's Shift from a military ally to adversary, and reasons for this change. By offering an essential understanding of existing knowledge and identifying gaps, the literature review plays a critical role in research. In this paper, a comprehensive review of the related scholarly work has been achieved and is presented.

Literature Review

Since a literature review is a critical evaluation of previous knowledge on a certain topic, the authors examined the findings from previous studies and integrated them to establish the current understanding of the topic. It provides a basis for future research by examining the gaps in knowledge, inconsistencies, and recent advancements in the field. In this study, assessment of the literature is divided into two clusters: the first covers PTI and civil-military relations, focusing on the rise, challenges, and decline of military support for the party, and the second reviews military preferences and the political alignment with PTI.

PTI's Relations with State Institutions: Upswing and Degeneration

In Pakistan, the relationship between the military and political parties has brought much interest among scholars, especially in light of how military power affects the political environment. According to a piece of literature, as both a political player and a gatekeeper of political legitimacy, Pakistan's military has always been an integral part of the nation's political processes (Rizvi, 2009). This dynamic has led to the rise and fall of several political groups, such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which emerged as a force to contend with established political elites. Specifically, PTI's rise has been closely associated with military support, which allowed the party to secure an overwhelming victory in the general elections in 2018. Another part of the literature claims that military support gave PTI political legitimacy and allowed it to overcome institutional obstacles (Shah, 2019). The obstacles usually obstruct emerging political groups in Pakistan, but passing these obstacles through military support contributed to the PTI's victory. The literature assumes that allegations of electoral manipulation by the opposition during the 2018's elections indicate a deep involvement of the military in PTI's win, demonstrating the military's backing for both political manoeuvring and electoral processes (Nawaz, 2024). The academic works identify that the way the PTI handled economic difficulties was one of the main governance flaws that led to its fall in military support. The military started to lose faith in the PTI government's capacity to lead as it faced economic instability, inflation, and growing debt (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). According to Nawaz (2024), the military's 2022 withdrawal of support was an indication of changing priorities as it attempted to keep control of the nation's political and economic stability.

According to a scholar Hassan Akhtar Rizvi, a party leader's populist speech, which resonate with the military and the general population in the start, lost popularity when the party's policies became inconsistent and unpredictable (Rizvi, 2009). PTI faced same situation as it failed to fulfil promises of reforms and good governance, leading to dissatisfaction of military. PTI's relationship with the military further weakened by its inability to handle internal party conflicts and the inaction of government on national issues like the COVID-19 pandemic (Shah, 2019). Another scholar R.W. Janjua maintains that since the military has a strong influence on political decision-making, the mistrust frequently highlights the relationship between civilian governments and the military (Janjua, 2021). The disintegration of the PTI-military alliance also reflects the major difficulties in Pakistani civil-military relations and PTI's case serves as a reminder of Pakistan's precarious civilian rule and the difficulties of political leaders in encountering and negotiating the complex civil-military relationship in the country. PTI's leaders lost legitimacy in the eyes of the military and the general public as their relationship with the military worsened. This generated debates on Pakistan's political leadership and the military's ongoing influence on the political climate of the nation (Nawaz, 2024; Rizvi, 2009).

Military Preferences and the Political Alignment with PTI

Historically, the military formed an alliance itself with political parties that not only facilitates its institutional control but also resonate with its public issues, such as accountability and national security (Rizvi, 2009). As for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the military's initial support for this group resulted from a confluence of interests, rested in both strategic concerns and ideological agreement. PTI's rise in the political landscape offered the military an opportunity to counterbalance traditional political elites, particularly the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). The PMLN had developed an adversarial relationship with the military over issues of civilian supremacy and governance (Shah, 2019).

The charismatic personality of the military-backed Imran Khan, the PTI's leader increased his popularity among the middle and lower classes. PTI's anti-corruption narrative aligned with the military's public image as a guardian of integrity, particularly during a time when public dissatisfaction with dynastic politics and governance failures was at its peak (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). Additionally, the military viewed PTI as an inexperienced political entity compared to more established political parties (Nawaz, 2024). According the accessible academic work, the PTI's was a deliberate attempt to alter Pakistan's political climate in a way that increased the military's overall power rather than merely reflecting institutional partiality. The military significantly influenced PTI's success in the 2018 elections, with allegations of pre-election engineering and manipulation. The military wanted to find an alliance who would support its strategic interests, especially in defense policy, counterterrorism, and regional geopolitics; therefore, it backed PTI.

The differences between the PTI and the military became apparent due to concerns in governance issues. The failure of the PTI to provide efficient economic management was one of the main causes of the conflict. In order to preserve public order and protect national interests, the military's support for civilian governments frequently depends on their ability to maintain economic stability. The military began to doubt PTI's capacity to govern successfully as a result of its inability to manage growing unemployment, inflation, and budget deficits (Shah, 2019). Furthermore, the disintegration of PTI's relationship with the military was facilitated by the party's leadership approach. The important stakeholders, particularly military commanders were alienated by Imran Khan's centralized decision-making and dependence on a small group of advisors. The collaboration was further strained by the party's inability to control internal conflicts and deal with significant national crises like the COVID-19 outbreak and public demonstrations. Scholars argued that the military became more and more suspicious of PTI's capricious policies and uneven direction, undermining the reform and stability narrative that had first brought the two sides together.

The overall 2022 military departure was a strategic realignment as well as a response to PTI's governance shortcomings. As noted by scholar Shuja Nawaz, the military attempted to disassociate itself from the PTI government's increasing unpopularity in order to maintain its institutional reputation and its position as the mediator of political authority (Nawaz, 2024). This withdrawal demonstrates how Pakistani civil-military relations are transactional in nature, with alliances depending on civilian governments' capacity to support military objectives. This study explored the reasons for PTI's evolving relationship with the military, the governance issues that influenced this dynamic, and the wider ramifications for Pakistani civilian administration.

Research Gap

Review of the literature identified a gap in the current scholarly work on the topic of the rise and fall of the PTI-military relationship in the period of 2018-2022. The literature mostly focuses on the success of the PTI and its relations with the military, but the areas where its differences with the military become stronger, and the later worse situation are not discussed much. Therefore, by critically exploring the factors behind PTI's initial alliance with the military and its governance challenges and differences with the military, authors attempt to address the gap existed in the literature. The aim of this study how the relationship between Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the military establishment has changed over time. Adopting a qualitative methodological approach, the study draws on the main theories of civil-military relations and populism to evaluate the situations underlying PTI's shifting trajectory. The study explores the wider implications of PTI's evolving relationship with the military for Pakistan's democratic governance and political stability. Additionally, the findings of this study offered valuable lessons for policymakers, political analysts, and scholars studying governance and civil-military relations.

Theoretical Framework

Generally, civilian government should have control over the military, and the military should not interfere in the political affairs of an idealistic democratic state; however, there are differences of perception among political scholars (Lutterbeck, 2011). For example, Samuel Huntington on the one hand and Morris Janowitz on the other hand represent two different thoughts. Huntington emphasizes military professionalism, implying a specific expertise and responsibility for military functions as a separate organization within a state. However, in contrast to Huntington, Janowitz did not advocate separation between the military and civilian realms in order to achieve civilian control of the military, but rather conjunction between the two. In this article, civil-military relations theory, which examines the interaction and balance of power between civilian governments and military commands in a country, is employed to assess relations between PTI and Pakistan's military establishment. The authors of this research article also added the concept of populism to the theoretical framework to analyse the PTI's popular slogan for a struggle against corruption. Actually, populism is a political philosophy that supports the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite (Acemoglu et al., 2013).

Methodology is crucial in research in social science to ensure systematic, effective, and consistent data gathering and investigation, producing reliable results concerning a societal phenomenon. By using secondary sources such as books, research reports, articles, etc., this research employed the descriptive approach of qualitative method which is a research technique to systematically analyse phenomena in social science. According to the literature on descriptive approach, it is a method of fact finding with a appropriate interpretation of the social topics (Krishnarao, 1961). Thus, this methodological model provides an accurate and detailed description of the situation that erupted due to dynamics of relations between PTI and the military establishment in the period.

The Emergence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

Imran Khan founded the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), also known as the "Pakistan Movement for Justice," on April 25, 1996. PTI emerged in the midst of Pakistan's deteriorating political system, widespread political corruption, and a lack of accountability. After leading Pakistan to victory in the 1992 Cricket World Cup, Imran Khan, a well-known cricket star in his prime, entered politics with the claim of establishing an equitable and corruption-free society. The early years of PTI were difficult since it lacked financial resources, political expertise, and a cohesive base of supporters (Talbot, 1998). PTI did not gain parliamentary seats in the 1997 general elections, indicating its limited political reach but the party continued to remain on the periphery of Pakistani politics while advocating democratic governance, anti-corruption campaigns, and judicial reforms. The PTI participated in the 2002 general elections, but it failed to secure a significant number of seats in the National and provincial assemblies. These were the first general elections after the military coup

led by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. Later, Imran Khan refused to continuously support General Pervez Musharraf's military dictatorship and abstained from the 2008 general elections (Rizvi, 2009). Despite this setback, Imran Khan continued to build the party's ideology, focusing on grassroots organizing and youth engagement. The PTI's massive gathering in Lahore on October 30, 2011, was the turning point of its rise. Many young Pakistanis and members of the urban middle class who had lost faith in the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) were among the thousands of supporters who joined this protest (Javid, 2019). PTI's transformation from a little opposition party to a major political force was symbolized by the gathering. A key factor in the party's rising popularity was its use of internet forums and social media to organize its supporters.

PTI emerged as the second-largest party by votes in the 2013 general elections in centre and assumed as a largest political entity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province. With this win, PTI was able to highlight its governance model into effect in the province, which included reforms in the areas of education, health and police. However, it failed to establish a federal government but blamed PML-N for electoral fraud. In order to demand electoral changes and election transparency, the party staged a 126-day sit-in (dharna) in Islamabad in 2014 (Shafqat, 2020). Finally, Imran Khan became Pakistan's 22nd prime minister after the PTI secured a majority in the 2018 general elections. It marked the party's greatest political victory. PTI ran on an anti-corruption platform, contributing to a welfare state founded on Riyasat-e-Madina (state of Madina, referring early Islamic state) ideals, institutional accountability, and economic reforms (Jalal, 2014). Strong media coverage, pledges of reforms, and allegations on opposing parties for corruption were all factors in the party's success.

PTI's Governance Approach and Policy Priorities

After securing a majority in the 2018 general elections, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under the Prime Minister Imran Khan adopted a governance approach centred on institutional reforms, economic stabilization, and social welfare. The party's policy agenda was dominated by election promises, e.g., elimination of corruption, creation of a Riyasat-e-Madina-inspired welfare state, and transparency in the government (Hussain, 2024). Nevertheless, PTI was confronted with formidable challenges in the implementation of its agenda because of economic limitations, administrative inefficiencies, and changing political alignments. Economic stabilization was one of the key agendas of the policies of PTI in view of Pakistan's ongoing fiscal deficit and balance-of-payments issues. One of PTI's primary policy priorities was economic stabilization, given Pakistan's persistent fiscal deficits and balance-of-payments crisis. The government took austerity measures, approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for finance, and implemented structural reforms to increase tax revenues (Zaidi, 2015). The economy continued to be in a sluggish condition, despite attempts at curbing inflation and improving the collection of revenue, and the adverse situation, fuelled by global economic downturns and

domestic governance issues (Laporte & Ahmed, 1990). As mentioned, one of the key pillars of PTI's governance policies was its anti-corruption campaign; the strategy resulted in high-profile accountability proceedings against opposition party leaders. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was busy investigating and prosecuting corruption crimes, although its critics accused it of selective action and politically motivated actions (Shafqat, 2020).

PTI launched the Ehsaas Program, a comprehensive social protection initiative that aims to reduce poverty, promote financial inclusion, and provide access to essential services, taking inspiration from the Islamic welfare model (Gazdar, 2011). The government also introduced the Sehat Sahulat Program, offering health insurance to poor households. These efforts were, however, limited by fiscal space and implementation challenges. PTI's foreign policy orientation attempted to balance relations with the great powers while prioritizing regional peace and economic diplomacy. The government focused on the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute, enhanced relations with China under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and managed complicated relations with the United States and the Gulf countries (Jaffery, 2022). The PTI's political patronage from the security establishment eventually declined significantly as a result of growing conflicts with the military establishment over decisions about foreign policy and governance.

Opposition's Concerns

Accountability was a cornerstone of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) governance strategy since its rise to power in 2018. PTI, under the leadership of Imran Khan, positioned itself as an anti-corruption party, pledging to eliminate systemic corruption, hold public officials accountable, and ensure transparency in governance (Hussain et al., 2021). While the party launched several accountability initiatives, its measures were met with significant criticism from opposition parties, legal experts, and civil society groups, who argued that the accountability process was selective and politically motivated (Shafqat, 2020).

PTI's government empowered the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to investigate and prosecute corruption cases, particularly against political figures and public officials. The government also introduced reforms in public sector institutions to curb financial mismanagement and strengthen oversight mechanisms (Zaidi, 2015). Furthermore, the Asset Declaration Scheme was launched to encourage transparency by requiring individuals to declare undisclosed assets, aiming to broaden the tax base and discourage illicit wealth accumulation (Zaidi, 2015). These efforts were framed within PTI's broader commitment to governance reforms and economic stabilization.

One of the most high-profile initiatives was the crackdown on money laundering and financial misappropriation, targeting influential political figures, including former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari. The PTI government claimed that these measures were necessary to restore public

confidence in governance and recover stolen national wealth (Gazdar, 2011). However, the selective nature of these investigations raised concerns about whether accountability was being pursued as a genuine reform or as a tool for political victimization. Opposition parties, particularly the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) accused PTI of weaponizing accountability institutions to weaken political adversaries. They argued that while opposition leaders faced relentless scrutiny and legal proceedings, members of PTI and its allies were largely exempt from similar investigations (Jaffery, 2022). The opposition further criticized the government's reliance on the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), highlighting its history of political bias and coercive tactics. Some reports suggested that the NAB disproportionately targeted opposition figures while showing leniency toward government officials accused of corruption (Rizvi, 2009).

Legal experts and human rights organizations also raised concerns regarding violations of due process during accountability proceedings. Several high-profile arrests were made without formal convictions, leading to prolonged detentions and media trials that damaged the reputations of accused individuals without substantive legal outcomes (Shafqat, 2020). This led to allegations that PTI was using accountability as a means of political engineering rather than as a structural reform initiative. The controversy surrounding PTI's accountability measures contributed to growing political instability in Pakistan. The opposition, feeling marginalized and persecuted, organized protests and movements against the government, including the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), which sought to challenge PTI's legitimacy (Laporte & Ahmed, 1990). This polarization hindered governance, as national discourse became dominated by political rivalry rather than policy debates.

PTI's Conflict with State's Institutional Interests

A section of the academic sources assumed that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) initially enjoyed strong backing from the military establishment, which perceived the party as a credible alternative to the entrenched political elite accused of corruption and poor governance (Hussain et al., 2021). The military's tacit support played a crucial role in PTI's victory in the 2018 general elections, with reports suggesting institutional manoeuvring that facilitated its rise to power (Zaidi, 2021). However, over time, this alliance began to fracture as policy differences, governance challenges, and power struggles emerged between Imran Khan's civilian government and the military establishment.

One of the earliest signs of tension between PTI and the military was Imran Khan's approach to foreign policy, particularly concerning Pakistan's strategic positioning in the region. Khan's independent stance on Afghanistan, his vocal opposition to the U.S. interventionism, and efforts to strengthen ties with China and Russia diverged from the military's traditionally pro-Western strategic alignment (Rizvi, 2009). Additionally, his reluctance to fully align with the military on matters related to India and security policies caused further strains (Laporte & Ahmed, 1990).

Another major source of contention was PTI's handling of key bureaucratic and military appointments. The controversy surrounding another extension in former Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa's tenure highlighted the growing mistrust between the two sides. There was also a noteworthy dispute between then Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military establishment in October 2021 over the appointment of a new Director-General (DG) of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). While the military expected smooth cooperation, delays and legal challenges in securing the extension raised concerns within the establishment about PTI's reliability as a governing partner (Siddiqua, 2021). Furthermore, Khan's attempts to exert greater civilian control over institutions traditionally influenced by the military establishment, including foreign affairs and internal security, signalled an emerging power struggle.

The decisive moment in PTI-military relations came in 2022 when the military signalled its neutrality during the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan. Previously, military influence had played a role in stabilizing PTI's government by managing opposition challenges. However, as economic instability, governance failures, and public discontent grew, the establishment reportedly decided to step back, allowing political developments to unfold without interference (Zaidi, 2015). The military retreated from political turmoil, reiterating its neutral characterization, but it was unable to placate PTI, which intensified anti-establishment rhetoric. PTI leaders and members openly condemned the establishment for supporting the opposition parties in initiating regime change. Khan himself publicly blamed foreign forces for conspiring with local players to oust him from power (Shafqat, 2020). The military, in response, distanced itself from the political turmoil, emphasizing its apolitical stance, but this did little to appease PTI, which intensified its anti-establishment rhetoric.

Mass rallies and demonstrations led by PTI experienced this change, with PTI activists boldly defying traditional power structures. The party took a stand as a defender of democratic values against what it portrayed as an omnipresent, interventionist establishment. The military, however, reacted by repressing PTI activists and leaders, which led to arrests, censorship, and legal action against PTI activists (Rizvi, 2009). The change also had long-term, far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's civil-military relations. PTI's challenge to the military shattered the traditional political status quo, challenging the notion that no ruling party could govern effectively without establishment backing. This challenged the future of civilian supremacy and highlighted the continued role of military influence in Pakistani politics (Siddiqua, 2021).

Results and Discussion

This section of a paper is one of the most critical parts, as it presents some key findings, recommendations, and conclusions of this study. It summarizes and interprets all significant portions of the paper. Here is a classification of what this section characteristically covers:

Findings

Initial Alignment (2018–2019): The strategic alignment between Pakistan's military and PTI played a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of the 2018 general elections. This collaboration was characterized by alleged electoral manipulations, administrative interventions, and policy convergences in key areas, including stringent anti-corruption measures, comprehensive economic reforms, and the reinforcement of national security (Ali & Sayeed, 2018; Khan et al., 2022). These dynamics not only facilitated PTI's electoral success but also raised critical concerns regarding the transparency and legitimacy of the democratic process in Pakistan.

Dependence on Military Support: PTI heavily relied on presumably military backing to stabilize its government, especially when facing intense opposition protests and widespread political instability. In the immediate aftermath of the 2018 polls, the military's support proved vital in countering disruptions and maintaining order, a reliance that underscored PTI's vulnerability without such backing (Sulehria, 2023; Weinbaum, 2023).

Growing Tensions (2020–2021): Over time, differences between PTI and the military emerged over governance and economic crisis management. PTI's populist economic policies and fragmented response to challenges such as COVID-19 clashed with the military's disciplined, long-term approach to ensuring stability (Hussain, 2020; Khan, 2020). As economic challenges persisted with high inflation and sluggish growth, the military grew increasingly wary of PTI's short-term measures, which critics argued were ill-equipped to address structural issues (Husain, 2018).

Conflict over Appointments: The conflict over appointments, particularly the Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in 2021, marked a significant turning point in the relationship between Imran Khan and the military leadership (Khan, 2021). The PTI government's push for its preferred candidate was met with resistance from the military establishment, which was accustomed to controlling key appointments (Dawn, 2021). This power struggle highlighted the underlying tensions between the civilian government and the military (Wolf, 2021). Despite the government's objections, the military's insistence on appointing Lt. General Nadeem Anjum as the new DG ISI further exacerbated the rift (Reuters, 2021).

Foreign Policy Divergence: PTI's anti-U.S. rhetoric and promise of an "independent foreign policy" starkly contrasted with the military's pragmatic approach, which favoured maintaining balanced ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia for national security and economic stability (Haider, 2020). Furthermore, while the military pursued a balanced strategy with global powers, PTI leaned toward forging closer ties with Russia, reflecting differing visions for Pakistan's international role (Malik, 2020).

Public Criticism and Media Wars: Imran Khan's public criticism of the military's neutrality during the no-confidence motion in April 2022 exposed a deep

sense of betrayal and significantly deteriorated their relationship (Al Jazeera, 2022). In response, PTI supporters and allied media launched coordinated campaigns accusing the military of orchestrating the government's downfall, further intensifying the political polarization and fuelling a cycle of media wars (BBC News, 2022).

Post 2022 Fallout: The fallout from PTI's ouster in 2022 led to a significant deterioration in the relationship between the military and the PTI (Khan, 2022). The military's public distancing from the party prompted Imran Khan to accuse the establishment of colluding with opposition parties to remove him from power (Shah, 2022). In the aftermath, the military took on a more assertive role, cracking down on PTI leaders and supporters (Hussain, 2022). This series of measures deepened the divide between the military establishment and the PTI, highlighting the long-term consequences of their fractured alliance (Wolf, 2022).

Conclusion

The relationship between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the military evolved significantly from 2018 to 2022, beginning with a strategic alignment that facilitated PTI's rise to power but gradually deteriorating due to policy disagreements, governance challenges, and conflicts over institutional autonomy. Primarily, the purported military's support facilitated the alleviation of PTI's government, but tensions emerged over economic management, foreign policy, and key appointments, particularly a dispute over the further extension of Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa and the appointment of new ISI chief Lt. Gen. Nadeem Anjum. The final breakdown occurred during the no-confidence motion in 2022, when Imran Khan publicly criticized the military, leading to a deep and ongoing rift. During this time, Pakistan's civil-military relations were shown to be unstable, and the difficulties of balancing institutional tasks within a democratic framework were brought to attention.

It is crucial to establish clear institutional boundaries between civilian administration and military establishment, encouraging communication and avoiding bias in military appointments while emphasizing professionalism to resolve these problems. Strengthening democratic norms, ensuring economic stability, promoting sustainable governance, and developing a transparent foreign policy framework are essential to reducing civil-military disputes. Additionally, responsible media practices can help moderate tensions and foster a more constructive political environment. By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can work toward a more balanced and cooperative relationship between its civilian and military institutions, guaranteeing long-term stability and democratic progress.

Recommendations

Institutional Boundaries and Dialogue: It is crucial to clearly define institutional boundaries to prevent overreach and ensure that civilian governments and the military maintain their respective roles. Scholars argue that establishing robust frameworks for civilian control can help prevent the military from intervening in

political affairs. In addition, formal dialogue mechanisms between political leaders and military officials have been recommended to address grievances and rebuild mutual trust, as evidenced by disputes over critical appointments.

Depoliticization of Military Appointments: Although the appointments of senior military positions are the legal authority of the civilian government under the Prime Minister, they should not be based on personal preferences. This process should be carried out in consultation with the military leadership. Thus, depoliticizing key military appointments is essential to ensuring the military's professionalism and preventing undue political influence, particularly favouritism. This can be achieved by prioritizing merit-based selections free from politically favourable considerations.

Strengthening Democratic Norms: Promoting free and fair elections, as well as other democratic practices, can create a stable environment that diminishes reliance on military support for political legitimacy. Robust democratic institutions can help to prevent military intervention by ensuring that power is distributed evenly and that the rule of law is upheld.

Economic Stability through Long-Term Reforms: Economic stability through long-term reforms is crucial for reducing Pakistan's dependence on military backing for stability. A disciplined, long-term economic strategy can address structural economic challenges, such as fiscal deficits, inflation, and poverty. Sustainable economic growth can strengthen civilian institutions, reduce military influence, and promote greater civilian-military cooperation. To achieve economic stability, Pakistan must prioritize fiscal discipline, invest in human capital, and increase trade competitiveness requires a commitment to long-term economic planning, rather than short-term populist measures. By pursuing sustainable economic reforms, Pakistan can reduce its reliance on external debt, increase economic resilience, and create a more favourable business environment.

Transparent, Consensus-Based Foreign Policy: A transparent, consensus-based foreign policy framework is essential for promoting national unity and coherence in international relations. By developing a framework guided by national interests and agreed upon by both civilian and military leadership, Pakistan can balance its ties with traditional allies while presenting a more unified national stance on international issues. Such a framework would also help to reduce the military's influence in foreign policy decision-making, allowing civilian leaders to take a more prominent role. This, in turn, would promote a more balanced and sustainable foreign policy that reflects the country's broader national interests.

Media Responsibility: The perpetuation of responsible media practices is imperative in mitigating the deleterious effects of sensationalism and propaganda, which can exacerbate tensions between political and military institutions in Pakistan. Balanced reporting can facilitate informed public discourse, thereby bridging the lacuna between these institutions and promoting a more nuanced comprehension of

national security issues. By incentivizing responsible media practices, Pakistan can effectively reduce the dissemination of misinformation and foster a more constructive public debate on salient national security issues. This can decrease tensions between political and military institutions, thereby promoting a more stable and secure environment.

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