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**Pakistan's Democratic Crisis: Prospects and Challenges****Sadia Hashmi<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Central Punjab, Lahore Pakistan.Email: Ssadia787@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of this essay is to discuss Pakistan's democratic status across time, starting with its independence. It talks about how religion has influenced its development and the years that have followed. This important role opened the door for Pakistani politicians to continue using religion as a manipulative tactic to win elections. Additionally discussed in the study are Pakistan's democratic struggles and the part played by the Pakistani military in causing them. This study has proven that Pakistan still has difficulties preserving its democratic nature since it has had so few opportunities to have a democratic administration. These difficulties are exemplified by the general elections of 2024 and the circumstances that preceded them.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, democracy, military, politics, religion.

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**1. Introduction**

In a nation like Pakistan, the idea of democracy has never been entirely clear. If years of conflict and bloodshed, Pakistan was established with the intention that Muslims on the subcontinent would be able to freely practice their religious beliefs and political freedom if they had their own country. This wasn't always the case, though. Pakistan's democratic journey has encountered several obstacles, such as periods of political instability, full-scale economic consequences, military dictatorship, and socio-religious upheavals. In the year 2024, the general elections in Pakistan have once again sparked intense discussions and worries about the country's democratic nature as well as the incredibly complicated and dynamic situation at hand. During the early years of independence, the country entered into a democratic system, however, the democracy soon encountered problems that undermined its constitutional and institutional foundations and questioned whether it was truly democratic.

Numerous academics think that the exploitation of religion by all military rulers to gain power is one of the main causes of Pakistan's democratic institutions' increased vulnerability to failure (Shafiq, 2020). They could gain power directly (by imposing martial law) or indirectly (by using democratic leaders in the front to exercise their power in the background). There is no denying that this method of manipulation always seems to work on the people, even though it is intriguing to observe why politicians or military leaders feel so at ease and secure while playing the religion card on the Pakistani populace. Given how the country was founded, the Pakistani people may be subconsciously and internally conditioned to believe those who seem to be motivated by religion. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, founded his whole freedom struggle under the guise of religion. What the leaders previously found to be effective in kindling people's passion and excitement appears to be working rather well now as well. The leaders' motives are no longer so pure, that's the sole difference. However, they should be commended for their comprehension of the emotional mindset of Pakistanis, since it is so easy to repeatedly deceive them under the guise of religion. The military has controlled Pakistani politics from the country's founding, depriving the populace of the opportunity to live in a democracy.

In the year 1970, the first general elections were held where the people had the chance to vote for the state representative. Nevertheless, the democratic administration that was established that year did not last for very long. Pakistan's democracy has had several hiccups, chief among them being military takeovers and the incapacity of the country's democratic leaders. The democratic party leaders have consistently allowed the military to seize control of the state. Their countless instances of corruption, broken promises, and utter contempt for the needs of the people have departed that room. Therefore, it would appear to be fairly justified that Pakistan's democratic foundations remain shaky to this day. With the opposition party leader imprisoned and his party denied the ability to run campaigns, the opposition parties using the religion card to make the personal lives of party leaders public, the establishments backstabbing supporting and opposing parties, and the days it took to announce the election results.

The winning party has been accused by the national and international media of massively manipulating the elections, a charge that has been bolstered by several incidents that occurred during that period. A senior official admitted to fabricating poll results or the election commission manipulating Form-47, which requires the election commission to declare the results, as a result of, for instance, the shutdown of social media and mobile services in different parts of the country, which hindered public communication and poll workers' access. The general public in Pakistan appears dissatisfied with the election results and the conditions surrounding the elections, in addition to the purported electoral fraud and the governance style that only appears to be democratic.

### **Pakistan's Democratic and Dictatorship Phases**

Pakistan did not hold direct democratic elections until 1970 after gaining independence from British colonial forces (Ghilzai, 2020). Since its founding, Pakistan has seen several different types of government, including democracy, martial law, and presidential or parliamentary systems. Soon after its founding, Pakistan experienced several difficulties, including a dearth of skilled political leadership, a massive refugee crisis, problems with the alignment of the country's eastern and western wings, and a crisis of religious identity inside the state apparatus. It took Pakistan almost nine years to draft its first constitution because of these problems, among many others (Rizwan, Ahmad, & Bukhari, 2018). When the 1956 Constitution went into effect, there was a general expectation that qualified officials would hold important posts to meet the urgent demands of the people. It was thought that once experienced politicians lost their power, attention might be directed toward fighting corruption, implementing agrarian reforms, and promoting economic expansion. The constitution was ratified, but things did not go as expected. General Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958 (Ashraf, Khan, Zaidi, Abbasi, & Affandi, 2023). With the adoption of the 1962 Constitution, which fundamentally altered the spirit of the previous one and instituted a presidential administration, Ayub Khan set the foundation for democracy in Pakistan. However, because of significant problems including corruption, election manipulation, and rampant nepotism, this structure found it difficult to operate efficiently within the nation. This circumstance further complicated Pakistan's political landscape by highlighting the difficulties of enforcing democratic norms in settings where such systemic issues are common. Such a framework had significant ramifications for the court, resulting in a limited legal system that was influenced by authoritarian governance. These autocratic methods of Ayub Khan's rule ultimately led to significant popular disapproval by the end of 1968. Major political groupings came together to seek Ayub Khan's resignation as the result of widespread rallies that were fueled by the public's annoyance and desire for change. While East Pakistan demanded more provincial autonomy and equitable participation in the national legislature, proportionate to its population, West Pakistan demanded the restoration of the four provinces and the reinstatement of a parliamentary system. Ayub Khan was forced to resign because of the worsening law and order situation and growing unrest. He did, however, hand up authority to another military leader, Yahya Khan (Pardesi), in a move that perpetuated the cycle of military domination. He proclaimed martial law throughout the country, abolished the Constitution, suspended all political activity (but not political parties), and disbanded the National and Provincial Assemblies. The goal of this dramatic change was to restore normalcy, law, and order to stabilize the country. To establish a precedent for democratic involvement, the administration said after these actions that it would hold the nation's first general elections, based on the direct adult franchise principle.

Following a period of stringent military rule, this action was viewed as a step toward reestablishing some semblance of democratic administration. After martial law ended in 1973, the new civilian government reinstated the parliamentary form of government with a new constitution. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became Pakistan's first elected prime minister to serve a full five-year term during this time. General Zia-ul-Haq's declaration of martial law in July 1977, however, put an end to Pakistan's democratic trajectory and ushered in a new period of authoritarian governance that lasted until 1988. Following Zia-ul-Haq's death, Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister in 1988, which brought about a change in the political scene. Her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government was overthrown in 1990 amid charges of corruption and bad leadership, despite early optimism. Between 1993 and 1996, the PPP briefly regained power before being overthrown once more based on the same accusations (Ashraf, Khan, Zaidi, Abbasi, & Affandi, 2023). The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), or PMLN, was also in power during this turbulent time, serving from 1991 to 1993 and from 1997 to 1999. But when General Musharraf took over in a military coup in October 1999, their rule was also short-lived. The difficulties Pakistan's democratic institutions face were brought to light by this continuous cycle.

President Musharraf pledged to create a resilient democracy that could withstand military involvement despite these losses. He pledged to enhance basic services, reduce poverty, and increase access to human resources. Many of these promises, however, were never met. Similar to this, all political leaders have promised to put the welfare of the country first when they are elected, yet successive administrations have found it difficult to deal with the fundamental problems that the populace faces. This highlights the ongoing disconnect between political promises and the realities of government, as many Pakistanis still experience shortages in basic amenities including food, water, energy, and healthcare. Even though political parties have consistently called for the return of democracy in Pakistan during dictatorships, true democratic ideals have found it difficult to establish themselves for a variety of reasons. The regular confrontations and disagreements between governments are a major problem in Pakistani politics since they make it difficult to develop unified democratic principles. Pakistan's political leaders' inconsistent and undemocratic actions are the main barrier to the country's transition to true democracy. From 1988 to 1999 and again from 2008 to 2013, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) held power. Even though both parties, led by figures like Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, advocated for democracy to be restored, they regularly ignored the rights of the general public, particularly those of minorities, the rule of law, and access to necessities.

Accordingly, both parties unintentionally contributed to the continuation of undemocratic political and social standards (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018). Due to two important legacies, the military has played a prominent role in Pakistani politics from its inception. First, there is a widespread perception in the military that civilians are incapable of managing state affairs or establishing a viable and functional administration. Because of this view, the military has come to see itself as the country's main defender, using the "doctrine of necessity" to defend its political meddling. This intervention covers both internal and external security issues as well as leadership selection issues. In addition to adopting a "self-help" mentality, the military has established designated areas within public policies for its business endeavours, or "milbus," which cater to the private interests of military members. Furthermore, the military has established autonomy over its organizational activities by pursuing a foreign policy free from civilian scrutiny and cultivating direct contacts with countries like the United States. Second, the armed services aim to continue having a say in decision-making because they understand that unrestricted military control is impractical. The military was drawn into politics and the "Troika" system was established when unelected leaders were chosen to maintain the colonial hierarchical government system, which has the military and bureaucracy as its main pillars. Muneer & Aryal, (2024) say that after 1972, this system of military and civilian power-sharing became deeply embedded in Pakistani politics. Driven by its sense of civilian institutional weakness and its desire to maintain its influence in national governance, these interwoven legacies have helped to explain the military's continued political involvement.

The primary problem in Pakistan is not the democratic system per se, but rather the dictatorial

inclinations of leaders and governments. After taking office, politicians usually fall short of their pledges. For example, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif claimed to be committed to restoring democracy, yet his government found it difficult to solve urgent problems that affected the average person, such as unemployment, poverty, and the energy crisis. The enormous communication gap between political leaders and the general public is one of the main reasons why political parties in Pakistan fail (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018). Regardless of whether civil or military authorities have held power, this division has persisted throughout the nation's history. Even if the majority of political actors seem to favor democracy, there is often a lack of genuine desire to promote the growth and advancement of democratic norms in Pakistan's political environment, which has long suffered from democratic deficits. When running for office, political leaders usually put winning elections and winning over the people first, but after they take office, they often turn their backs on the everyday issues and demands of the average person. The electorate feels alienated and disenchanted as a result of this estrangement, which intensifies the already stark divide between the ruling class and the general populace. This communication gap is further widened by the lack of efficient avenues for interaction and discussion between the public and political leaders. A cycle of disconnection and alienation is sustained when political parties fail to set up strong channels for constant communication and citizen input, which eventually threatens the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic governance (Hassam et al., 2013). Political leaders are also frequently distracted from addressing the true needs and aspirations of the people by structural problems like nepotism, corruption, and vested interests. When self-interest is put ahead of the general welfare, it undermines confidence in the democratic process and makes military interventions more likely since disenchanted citizens may see the military as a better option to resolve their issues and bring about stability.

Essentially, one of the main causes of Pakistan's repeated cycles of democratic failure and military takeovers is the political parties' inability to close the communication gap and give real priority to the promotion of democratic norms and practices. Building a more responsive and inclusive democratic system that serves the interests of all citizens requires addressing these fundamental problems. A significant turning point in Pakistan's political history, the general elections of 2024 were marked by protests, conflicts, and a great deal of political ambiguity. Several issues plagued the election process, such as post-election protests, allegations of electoral malpractice, and difficulties in establishing a new administration (Khaliq, 2024). But above all, their importance can be assessed by looking at the critical situations that were common in the nation. Another depressing chapter in Pakistan's democratic journey was the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 9, 2023. Khan had gained strong political support across the country after being removed from the government the year before by a parliamentary vote of no confidence and escaping an assassination attempt. Khan's incarceration regrettably contributed to the trend in Pakistani politics where most previous prime leaders have been imprisoned or charged after leaving office. This pattern is indicative of a recurrent theme: the Pakistan Army's hegemonic power, which usually endures under all conditions. This dynamic is best shown by Imran Khan's rise to power in 2018 with the Army's implicit support and his subsequent removal in 2022 after losing that support. Significant economic difficulties accompanied the most recent political unrest. The economy was already struggling with worrying inflation rates, which were said to be the highest in fifty years, as well as growing shortages of food and energy before massive flooding destroyed significant tracts of agricultural land. Exports were declining investment inflows, and Pakistan was in danger of going into default on its debt. In light of this, the coalition government led by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif of the PML-N and consisting of Khan's PTI, which was established under the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) flag, as well as other significant political organizations, found it difficult to handle the situation before to the general elections in 2024.

Additionally, elections might promote communication between the military and political authorities, boosting trust in Pakistan's institutions (Schwemlein, 2023). Transparent, timely elections free from interference could have restored confidence in the democratic process, even if traditionally military-dominated structures interfered in elections to affect results. The unwillingness to defend democratic values was probably due to concerns about the possible results of

the election, highlighting Pakistan's ongoing fight to preserve democracy.

### **Key Players in Pakistani Politics:**

Three key players dominate Pakistani politics in the lead-up to the general elections in 2024: Imran Khan of the PTI, Nawaz Sharif of the PML-N, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of the PPP. Imran Khan founded the PTI in 1996, and it immediately made a name for itself in politics by fighting corruption. As a result of Khan's steady rise in popularity, the party won its first term in office in 2018. But by 2022, Khan's fortunes had drastically deteriorated, and he was overthrown, primarily due to a lack of military backing. Khan has been dealing with legal issues since August 2023, including being imprisoned for several crimes (Patel, 2024). With a strong dedication to Islamic values, justice, governance, and the rule of law, PTI's electoral platform is modelled after Madinah and is motivated by the ideas of the Islamic welfare state. To achieve its goals, the party declared that it would propose constitutional reforms. As part of its approach, PTI established a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" to address the nation's differences and promote national unity. To provide free healthcare across the country, the manifesto included plans to increase healthcare accessibility and broaden the revenue base through the expansion of the Health Card program. PTI also sought to standardize the educational system in every area. PTI's policy placed a high priority on bolstering accountability systems to successfully fight corruption. This entails establishing provincial anti-corruption units, establishing a top-tier academy devoted to combating corruption, and resolutely addressing white-collar crime. Khan has openly attacked the military, claiming that he was the target of deliberate attacks, including an assassination attempt. The possibility that this clash will signal a change in Pakistani politics toward more autonomy from military involvement has generated a lot of debate. Tensions increased in 2023 when Khan's supporters clashed with military installations, leading to several arrests, Khan's exclusion from national media, and a 10-year prison sentence for allegedly disclosing state secrets.

Shahbaz Sharif and the PML-N, a party with a lengthy history of government centred on the business and conservative sectors since the 1980s, were made possible by this situation. The party, which has held power multiple times, is renowned for its infrastructure and economic reforms. There has been conjecture regarding Nawaz Sharif's political future since he controversially returned to Pakistan with military backing after being removed and living in exile due to a corruption scandal exposed by the Panama Papers and a subsequent conviction. The PML-N, led by Shahbaz Sharif, unveiled a bold plan that prioritized economic regeneration. It was especially focused on boosting the energy sector, expanding infrastructure development, and promoting economic growth through structural changes. To create over 10 million new jobs and bring the country's poverty rate down from 38% to 25% in five years, the party pledged to take on inflation and unemployment head-on. Achieving a 6% annual GDP growth rate, expanding annual exports to \$60 billion, and raising annual remittances from Pakistanis living abroad to \$40 billion are just a few of the lofty economic goals that the PML-N set. The party also suggested starting a nationwide 10,000MW solar energy project, adding 15,000MW of power to the national grid, and lowering electricity rates by 20–30%. The PML-N also stated in its policy framework that it aims to strengthen ties with China, provide tax breaks to the industrial sector, and raise the nation's tax-to-GDP ratio from 10.4% to 13.5% by 2029.

Additionally, as part of its larger aim to improve efficiency and streamline the economy, the party intended to proceed with the privatization of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) that were doing poorly (Web Desk, 2024). Zulfikar Ali Bhutto established the PPP in 1967, and it is still a major force with a leadership lineage among the Bhutto family, which includes Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari. Despite obstacles stemming from accusations of corruption, their son Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is now poised to compete for prime minister, embodying the party's progressive platform (Patel, 2024). The PPP's electoral platform was centred on improving social welfare, with particular emphasis on ending hunger and poverty, defending the rights of underprivileged communities and minorities, and fostering national cohesion.

Among their manifesto's highlights are pledges to use renewable energy sources like solar and

wind, provide 300 units of free power to the most impoverished households, and quadruple the actual income of wage earners within five years. Along with ensuring free primary healthcare services and constructing three million homes for female household heads, the PPP also launched many social welfare cards, including youth cards for the younger generation, mazdoor cards for labourers, and kissan (Farmer) cards for agricultural workers. Additionally, they suggested passing a Right to Food Act and launching a free 1000-day nutritional program for expectant and new moms (Web Desk, 2024). The 2024 elections saw a fiercely contested political struggle in Pakistan as each party brought unique visions and baggage from the past.

### **Use of Religion Card in Politics:**

Since the country's inception, Pakistani authorities have employed religion as a weapon and promoted it as a remedy for a variety of ailments afflicting its deeply distressed citizens. The idea that Pakistan is a place of purity for Muslims has been deeply embedded in public opinion and aids Islamists and populists in winning elections. Because liberal, secular, and progressive voices are being aggressively silenced in this context, Islam is increasingly becoming a part of Pakistani politics daily (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). This nation's politicians are fully aware of the mindset of the populace. They do not hesitate to strike those who will be most affected since they are aware that religion is their weakest point. Pakistan's political system has relied heavily on the "religious card" ever since gaining independence. Since it was incorporated into the Constitution in 1956, religious parties and some anti-democratic organizations have used it to topple democratic governments. Pakistan's political history provides the best clue as to how and why this card was used effectively there, even though these parties and coalitions were unable to win over voters.

Throughout Pakistan's history, the religion card has typically been used to turn the people against the opposition parties—which are typically the elected parties—as well as to garner votes and win over citizens (Raza et., 2012). Given how nonreligious his life was before entering politics, the opposition views PTI leader Imran Khan as having mostly exploited religion to win over the populace. An affluent Pakistani and well-known worldwide figure, Khan had spent much of his boyhood immersed in a largely "Western lifestyle." He became known as a "playboy" in the 1980s as a result of his behaviour, and tabloids regularly covered him. After going into politics, Khan "re-discovered" his Muslim heritage, gradually changing his perspective, his speech patterns, and even his comments about Islamic attire (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). In his early years, Khan was a "reformist" populist, and his inexperience in politics made him a unique leader. He garnered a small but loyal following in addition to his calls for corruption and opposition to the status quo. To survive in the harsh atmosphere of Pakistan, he took on a traditional, Muslim manner.

In this context of Islamist populism, Khan went beyond Islamism and added a "clash of civilizations" element to his speech, setting Muslims against the West. In support of the Afghan Taliban, he described them as "good." The Afghan Taliban, in his opinion, are fighting to free their country from "foreign" occupiers (Afzal, 2019). Khan developed the idea of "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan) for the 2018 election campaign, which primarily draws on Islamist civilizations and embraces all aspects of PTI's populism. Based on this idea, Khan presents a picture of an ideal Pakistan where the corrupt and powerful do not exist and Islam is a model for all aspects of life. Young people accept Islamic values and are not "misguided" by Western ideas, and there is an Islamic welfare and justice system in existence. The country became a representation of Islam and vehemently fought everything that was considered "un-Islamic." Every issue Pakistan suffers will be resolved by embracing the "true" teachings of Islam, which will also give the people of Islamist culture a country and a sense of national identity (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). With the obvious goal of gaining a national majority, PTI presented its populist plan for a New Pakistan that was modeled after Madinah's first Islamic state, Riyasat-e-Madina.

Islamic welfare is the foundation of this reformist interpretation of Islamist populism. Khan

earned the nickname "U-turn Khan" as a populist leader due to his unrealistic promises that never materialized (Mumtaz, 2021). Pakistan has suffered throughout its history whenever religion and politics have been combined. The abuse of the religion card has seriously damaged Pakistan's democratic values. Politicians can increase their authority by appealing to religious beliefs to win over conservative elements of the public. The predilection for religious debate over crucial policy issues has impeded Pakistan's progress and prosperity. Political leaders vying for power often embrace populist ideas rather than focusing on long-term development goals. Important issues like healthcare, education, and economic growth are thus overlooked. The persistent misuse of the religion card hinders the country's capacity to address pressing socioeconomic problems and stifles its potential for development and prosperity (Shahbaz, 2023). PTI leader Imran Khan was the target of multiple legal cases during the general elections of 2024, all of which were intended to guarantee his defeat. One of the cases against him was solely motivated by religious beliefs, which the majority of people in society view as reprehensible since it demonstrates how the opposition manipulates religion principles for political advantage and personal grudges. A Pakistani provincial court sentenced former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi to seven years in prison for their marriage, which the court ruled was against Islam.

### **Elections 2024**

Many people anticipated that former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had just returned from a four-year exile in London, would win this election handily. The chances were heavily skewed in favor of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party (PML-N) due to military partiality. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was imprisoned since August 2023, was formerly supported by the military until he was removed from power in April 2022. Khan's exclusion from running in this election cycle served as another evidence of the changing circumstances. Khan was sentenced to long prison terms in three different incidents, including charges of involvement in an illegal marriage and leaking state secrets, just days before the election (Afzal, 2024). While there were some instances of transparency violations during the polling process, observers noticed a noticeable improvement during the vote counting and tabulation stages that followed. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) faced criticism for its actions, which included delaying polls and forbidding the PTI from using its electoral emblem. The military establishment was accused of heavily influencing the pre-election process to support Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N). The delays in the final results announcement were cited by several candidates as proof of vote tampering (Khaliq, 2024). The Supreme Court of Pakistan dealt Khan's party a severe setback in January when it ruled that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the party's election emblem, was illegal. The party's famous symbol, the cricket bat, which commemorates Khan's remarkable tenure as captain of Pakistan's cricket team, was therefore absent from the ballots, as was the party name. All PTI candidates were consequently compelled to submit as independents. In a country where over 40% of the population is illiterate, election symbols are crucial. Additionally, the decision has wider implications: Without an official insignia, a party cannot claim seats reserved for women and minorities and faces the danger of its candidates being taken after the election.

The authorities had already been cracking down hard on PTI for the past year; this decision only made things worse. Thousands of party members were imprisoned, senior leadership was forced to leave politics, and the party struggled with campaign restrictions and media blackouts in the lead-up to the election. Consequently, the military-backed candidate and party appeared to be destined to win on election day. However, the outcomes of Pakistan's 2024 elections surprised a lot of people. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan and in power until April 2022, was predicted to lose because of allegations of pressure and harassment by security personnel over the past year. Imran Khan was recently found guilty of corruption and given a 14-year prison sentence, along with a five-year ban from entering public office. He has been behind bars since August of last year. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the PTI was able to win the most seats in the most recent elections for the Pakistan National Assembly. This is the first time that the traditional political institutions, including Pakistan's powerful military, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the major political parties, have not been able to

work together to win an election (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). "Even though Pakistan has now completed three parliamentary terms of five years each, democracy has not progressed in the country," writes Yaqoob Khan Bangash in his article (Bangash, 2024).

For just over ten years, the PMLN and PPP maintained their anti-establishment position by the Charter of Democracy. However, both parties gave in to the strains of the Imran Khan-led government after losing central government control in 2018 and were eager to win back the support of the establishment by 2022. This significant change calls for serious thought and in-depth research, especially from groups that have traditionally suffered because they disobeyed the status quo. It highlights the difficulties and constraints of keeping an anti-establishment stance in Pakistani politics. Moreover, it seems that the PTI's alleged anti-establishment posture depends only on the establishment's resistance to Imran Khan. The PTI might very well ally themselves with the establishment again if things were to alter. These events are indicative of Pakistan's politics, which are changing quickly due to the rise of populist and neo-fascist beliefs.

The results of the days-long election surprised many, as Khan's PTI-backed candidates did not win an absolute majority but did win the most parliamentary seats. The party asserts that it would have gained more seats if it weren't for alleged government interference.

### **Prospects and Challenges to Democracy in Pakistan:**

The highly controversial elections in 2024 cast a shadow over Pakistan's democratic future, posing grave questions regarding the fairness of the voting process and the likelihood of true democratic rule. Numerous claims of electoral fraud, state meddling, and electoral system manipulation threaten democracy's foundation and weaken public confidence in political institutions. Following such elections, it seems unclear where Pakistani democracy would go. The development of democratic norms and institutions is severely hampered by the enduring influence of strong non-democratic actors, such as the military establishment, and the continuation of election malpractices. The possibilities for a dynamic and inclusive democratic system are further undermined by the persistence of dynastic politics and the manipulation of election results.

Furthermore, the stability and legitimacy of the government are threatened by the deterioration of democratic institutions and ideals, which also calls into question the validity of the electoral process. Political division and social unrest are made worse by the electoral process's lack of accountability and transparency, which also breeds disenchantment among the general public. Pakistan's leadership has to realize that elections are an opportunity to show a genuine commitment to democracy and human rights, not only to gain power, and to overcome the politics of polarization and division (Gossman, 2024). Pakistan held general elections on February 8, 2024. Since the country's election cycle was seriously interrupted in January 2023 by several political crises, casting doubt on democracy's viability, the 2024 elections were a momentous occasion. Therefore, the fact that Pakistani democracy has survived is wonderful news. Nevertheless, the outcomes of the 2024 elections offer a wealth of lessons.

The real significance of the 2024 elections lies in the continuation of an electoral process that has historically been the focus of political manipulation by Pakistan's security-oriented state. If there had been further delays in the process, even if they were flawed, the little "democratic" gains would have been lost. Democracy will remain a pipe dream until Pakistan's politicians realize how important it is to win in the long run. Pakistan continues to struggle with the tension between authoritarianism and democracy, just like other regions of the world.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Pakistan's recent electoral events present a complex picture of the nation's democratic journey, full of both chances and problems. As demonstrated by the fiercely contested elections of 2024, the recurrent topic of electoral anomalies serves as a sobering reminder of the ongoing challenges that impede the consolidation of democratic administration. Furthermore, accusations of fraud and the influence of non-democratic forces, such as the military establishment, have cast doubt



on the validity of Pakistan's democratic principles and the integrity of the election process.

The frequent practice of using religious identities and sentiments for political ends in Pakistan has frequently resulted in intolerance, divisiveness, and sectarianism. In addition to undermining secularism and pluralism, the use of religion as a campaign tool deepens societal divisions and calls into question the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Pakistan has never benefited from the formation of religious involvement in the political system. But despite these difficulties, there are also indications of resiliency and optimism. Human rights advocates, civil society groups, and democratic movements are still pushing for accountability, transparency, and election change. Even though there was a great deal of despair and doubt about the legitimacy of the elections, Pakistanis nevertheless went out to vote.

The public's level of enthusiasm demonstrates that the country is still very much alive. Pakistani citizens still have a cause to fight for. Holding the government responsible and advancing democratic ideals can also be greatly aided by international scrutiny and pressure. Meaningful reforms that tackle the underlying causes of election misconduct, fortify democratic institutions, and promote an open and accountable culture are essential going ahead. This involves actions to guarantee the independence of electoral authorities, limit the influence of non-democratic actors, and encourage civic engagement and education. Furthermore, building a more accepting and tolerant society requires initiatives to counteract religious deception and advance interfaith harmony. In the end, Pakistan's democracy depends on the resolve of its people, institutions, and political leaders to preserve democratic principles, defend fundamental rights, and make sure that the people's will is represented in free, fair, and legitimate elections. Notwithstanding the obstacles

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