

## HYBRID REGIMES AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: IS PAKISTAN MOVING BEYOND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY?

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### Abstract

Contemporary democratic backsliding is a particularly significant political phenomenon of the twenty-first century and therefore shakes up classical assumptions about the inevitable evolution of democratic governance. Rather than crumbling wholesale into overt authoritarianism, many regimes maintain the trappings of democratic institutions (especially elections) at the same time they are dismantling liberal norms, civil liberties and the institutional independence (Bermeo, 2016; Luhrmann & Lindberg, 2019). This aspect is generally referred to as a hybrid regime. Pakistan is an example of this global change: since 2008 it has had unbroken electoral continuity and civilian rule, but democratic consolidation is still far away. While elections continue, substantive democracy that includes civilian supremacy, the rule of law, political pluralism and protection of civil liberties progressively degrades (Rizvi, 2018; Fair 2023). This article argues that Pakistan has progressed beyond the level of electoral democracy to become representative of the characteristic features of a stabilised hybrid regime. Relying on institutional analysis and comparative democratic theory as well as recognized international benchmarks for measuring democratic formula, including Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute, the study shows that electoral processes in Pakistan are more of a regime-legitimizing instrument than mechanisms of democratic accountability. By situating Pakistan in the wider literature on hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding, the article adds to the comparative theory on democracy and furthermore gives an in-depth understanding of the authoritarian adaptation in South Asia.

### 1.1 Introduction: Democracy Without Deepening

The last two decades have witnessed democracy move into an era of global uncertainty. The optimism that came with the third wave of democratisation is increasingly replaced by fears about democratisation stasis and regression. Empirical data tells us that increasing numbers of states are seen to be in economic decline rather than progress, with eroding seen in the electoral integrity, judicial independence, and civil liberties (Luhrmann et al,2020). Crucially, such declining democratic quality often takes the form of gradual

regime decline, often mediated by legal and constitutional means of democratic subversion by political elites while maintaining an appearance of continuance (Bermeo, 2016).

One of the salient characteristics of democratic erosion today is the survival of elections. Unlike military dictatorships and single party regimes of the twentieth century, many contemporary political systems still maintain multiparty elections, legislatures and constitutional regimes. Yet these institutions are increasingly operating in a hollowed out form, providing little political choice and limited accountability (Schedler,

2006). Elections still play an important role in bolstering regime legitimacy, but the democratic aspect of the process is undermined by uneven competition, manipulation of the rule-of-law structures and selective enforcement of norms. This paradox has led scholars to move beyond the binary relationship of democracy and authoritarianism and rather look at hybrid forms of political organisation.

Pakistan provides a particularly good example. So since the end of direct military rule in 2008, Pakistan has enjoyed electoral continuity unlike any other country in the world. Civilian governments have served out their terms, power changes have come about through elections, and constitutional frameworks remain. On the surface, these developments portend democratic development. However, an expanding corpus of scholarship fills a gap in literature about ongoing asymmetries in civil-military relations, politicization of accountability institutions, restrictions on the exercise of media freedom, and an increasingly limited space for dissent (Rizvi, 2018; Shah, 2014). Consequently, Pakistan's democratic experience has raised a fundamental analytic question, namely, whether electoral continuity alone can make up for democracy in the absence of democratic deepening.

This article brings Pakistan closer as an example of managed electoralism in which elections are less instruments of popular sovereignty and more tools for managing political competition. Rather than categorising Pakistan as simply democratic or authoritarian, the paper analyses the ways in which democratic institutions undergo transformations in order to coexist with the long-lasting trends of authoritarianism. building on the literature about hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism and especially a contribution by Levitsky & Way, this article argues that Pakistan has gone beyond electoral democracy to function as a stabilised hybrid regime. In this system, the core defining aspect is institutionalized elections which are subject to systematic constraints and democratic backsliding, rather than an episodic feature, of governance.

Based on a situating of Pakistan in broader comparative debates with relation to Pakistan this study provides both empirical and theoretical contribution. Empirically, it provides an institution-centred analysis of the post-2008 political order in Pakistan. Theoretically, it shows how hybrid regimes may be relatively stable without the consolidation of democracy and, thus, challenges minimalist versions of democracy that equate elections with democracy's success.

## 1.2 Electoral Democracy: and its Limitations

Voting, the idea of electoral democracy, has been an important place in democratic theory and especially in the field of comparative politics and democratization research. At its essence electoral democracy seeks, as the main feature of democratic government, competitive, regular and inclusive elections. This minimalist understanding was famously articulated by Joseph Schumpeter and views democracy as the procedural structure by which political leaders gain power as a result of competitive elections (Schumpeter, 1942). While appropriate for explicating the third wave of democratisation, this definition becomes subject to an increasing degree of criticism in light of the recent phenomenon of democratic backsliding.

Procedural or minimalist understandings of democracy are much more concerned with the presence of elections, political parties, and formal competition, with the deliberate avoidance of normative statements regarding the quality of both domestic or global governance and social equality. And this framework initially had one thing going for it for the scholar: it enabled us to classify what kind of regimes were we dealing with without requiring theological perfection of democracy right away. Yet empirical experience has noted that elections are hardly a sufficient measure for accountability in the functioning of democracies, nor a sufficient obstacle to the adequate functioning of authoritarian practices; there are many regimes that succeed in clearing the formal electoral bar while including no substance to their cores.

One of the most important limitations of electoral democracy is that it has a narrow institutional

focus. As a result, by placing such emphasis on elections at the expense of all other factors, minimalist models underestimate the importance of the rule of law, separation of powers, civil liberties, and institutional autonomy. Robert Dahl's later articulation of polyarchy, for instance, stresses that democratic legitimacy also entails not only participation and contestation, but also guarantees of freedom of expression, access to other information, and associational autonomy (Dahl, 1971). Without these conditions, elections round up to being performative exercises instead of legitimate mechanisms of popular oversight.

Scholars have shown more and more that we can have elections and authoritarian government go hand in hand. Andreas Schedler Electoral authoritarianism Suicidal States electoral authoritarianism is a regime controlled electoral owning rules, media access, legal rules and state resources, in order to secure a predictable outcome while maintaining a false appearance of competition (Schedler, 2006). In such systems, opposition parties are not abolished but controlled; voters are not barring them from the exercise of their rights but auctioning them off; institutions aren't torn down but rather used strategically against each other. Elections will thus become tools of regime management instead of means of democratic accountability.

This critique of electoralism takes on special meaning in postcolonial and security-minded states with democratically functioning institutions that are structural in their limitations. Power often lies in the hands of non-elected actors (i.e. militaries, security establishments, bureaucratic elites, or outside patrons), all of whom have decisive control over the outcome of politics. Electoral democratizations under these systems frequently operate under strict limits, within which civilian government can exist but not civilian control. As a result, democratic processes and ossified lines of power that are immune from popular oversight coexist.

Pakistan is a place that shows these limitations on paper. While the country does in some formal respects meet the standards of electoral democracy

- elections are held regularly and there are multiple political parties, civilian governments - the overall democratic context is very limited. The persistence of elections has not resulted in democratic deepening, institutional autonomy or effective accountability. Instead, elections are often used to legitimise arrangements forged outside the political arena of elections.

Theologically, the current theory of democracy has moved towards thicker and more substantive understandings of democracy. These tenets highlight not only how to make a choice for a leader, but also how the power is wielded and limited. Democracy, from this perspective, requires institutionalised uncertainty, where results are real, genuine, and things are truly open, when it comes to political power. When elections stop being uncertain events - due to managed elections, suppressed opposition or captured institutions - democracy loses its organic substance although its formal anatomy is sustained.

### 1.3 Electoral Democracy and Its Limits

The shrinkage of the Pakistani political life to a simple electoral democracy flag, one that boasts of the number of elections and the formal quality of the voting process, conceals an even more complex truth. Superficially, the constitution, frequent elections, and an active civil-society outlook of the country give a positive image of democratic health. However, a closer look at the electoral process reveals that the electoral process is just a show that hides the deep-rooted authoritarian tendencies. The historical pre-eminence of the military, the patron-client system that has dominated most provincial politics, and the selective insularity of the judiciary combine to produce an electoral system in which electoral outcomes are often a pre-determined outcome instead of a legitimate manifestation of the popular will. The categorisation of Pakistan as a procedural democracy in that context, both legitimizes the process of undermining democratic standards but also encourages the normalisation of a status quo in which power imbalances and dissenting voices are sidelined. A more subtle anaesthetic prism is thus essential, one that accepts elections as an

essential element of an operating polity, but one that without doubt accepts them as anything but sufficient unto themselves. Placing electoral politics into the wider framework of institutional hierarchies military, bureaucratic, economic, and socio-cultural, we come to understand even better how power is actually exercised and opposed in Pakistan. This holism approach, in its turn, provides scholars and practitioners with a more realistic set of diagnostic and remedial tools to diagnose and respond to democratic weaknesses of the country.

As we project this framework on to the concept of a hybrid regime, a new explanatory paradigm is formed. Hybrid regimes are not merely the conglomeration of democratic and authoritarian characteristics; it is an unstable balance where these two seemingly opposing aspects co-exist and support each other, as a regime strives to maintain its survival and pursue its economic and military dominion. In the Pakistani context, electoral processes coexist with the elite patronage networks of guaranteeing that the resources of the state are controlled by a select group of ruling elites, particularly the defence and security-related ones. The disproportionality of the military, combined with the inability of the state to retain its legitimacy through political favors, introduces a structural inseparability: elections legitimize the status quo, and the status quo, in its turn, legitimizes the continuation of the electoral process. The roots of this co-dependency can be best traced through the manner in which political parties, which are commonly financed and influenced by military or elite interests, control the political space, and through which the judiciary although purportedly independent tends to abide by executive or military prerogatives in issues that put the interests of the regime at risk. In such a way, the hybrid model serves as a prism, according to which to interpret the political architecture of Pakistan as a failed democracy, but rather as a carefully designed mechanism, balancing electoral involvement and authoritarian governance. This balance is fundamental to any substantive critique of the political course taken by Pakistan since it serves to point out where reforms should be

actively sought and where deeply-rooted systems of power do not accommodate change.

#### **1.4 Hybrid Regimes and Democratic Backsliding**

The conceptual development of "hybrid regimes" represents one of the most important changes in the field of comparative politics during the past three decades. During the post-Cold War period, scholars followed the paradigm of transition which claimed that any move away from absolute autocracy was necessarily a movement towards consolidated liberal democracy. As the twenty-first century rolled along, however, it became uncomfortably clear that many regimes were not simply "transiting" to denizen alternative states of governance, at least not to any great extent and speed. Scholars like Diamond (2002) and Schedler (2006) began to name such effectively these configurations hybrid regimes -systems which incorporated democratic procedure with authoritarian substance. These are not failed democracies but instead very skimpy, highly adaptable authoritarian systems that bring up democratic institutions to reconcile among elites, and to communicate legitimacy to foreign collaborators reconciling real challenge to their power with appeasement. Diamond (2002) points out that these regimes are defined by a "hollowed-out" democratic core, where there is a "menu of manipulation" that ensures the survival of the incumbent regime.

Central to such understanding is a framework known as competitive authoritarianism by Kevin M. Levitsky & Lucian Way (2010). They suggest that under these regimes some of the most basic requirements for democracy, including free and fair elections, civil rights and the level playing field, are systematically abused. Crucially, however, the violation is not total; if this were the case, then the regime would be a closed autocracy. Instead the element of competition continues because the opposition can still in theory win, forcing the latter to wage a constant, resource-heavy battle to skew the playing field in their favour. Levitsky & Way stress that lack of level playing field characterises these systems, which is

often taken in form of unequal access to media and state finance.

This struggle often takes the form of democratic backsliding, which, as Bermeo (2016) has put it, represents the "incremental erosion of institutions, rules and norms sustaining democratic governance." Unlike the sudden backsliding of the twentieth century—which often took the form of a military coup—modern day backsliding is frequently legalistic. It is done by democratically elected leaders who use the mandate they receive to dismantle the cheques and balances from within. Bermeo identifies executive aggrandisement as one of the main mechanisms involved, through the capture of the judiciary and the silencing of the press through regulatory "lawfare." Luhrmann & Lindberg (2019) describe this as a third wave of autocratization that is insidious to the extent that autocratic dictatorships have hidden in the surface of democratic political systems. In these hybrid spaces, the essential uncertainty of democracy is not eliminated, but is controlled via fabulous maneuvers that make it prohibitively costly to democratically oppose anything.

### 1.5 Pakistan's Electoral Order: The Continuity Without Consolidation

The political events of Pakistan since 2008 provide an interesting example of what has been termed "continuity without consolidation." For the first time in its history, successive civilian governments have completed the term of office, which is five years. On a surface level, this implies a breakthrough of democratic maturity. Yet an institutionalized analysis shows that although the electoral process holiday has regularized, the flesh and blood of democracy has rotted. Rizvi points out in the following article that the electoral continuity in Pakistan operates less as mechanism for popular sovereignty and more as an influential tool for elite circulation in a highly circumscribed security state structure. This is a continuity of civilization, check with a veneer of civilian supremacy, while underlying power structures are hardly at all affected by the ballot.

The main challenge to the democratic solidification in Pakistan is lack of institutional autonomy. The Election Commission of Pakistan, as it is constitutionally empowered, often works under the influence of the "establishment." As it is documented by the International Crisis Group (2018), Pakistani elections are often marred by what they call "pre-poll engineering," involving strategic use of judicial disqualifications, to remove "unreliable" candidates and deft defections of influential local power-brokers to preferred parties. These are the types of interventions that even though the public votes, the range of "acceptable" outcomes are narrowed down way before the first ballot, defeating the democratic principle of uncertainty.

Furthermore, the nature of political parties in Pakistan creates the inclination against the consolidation of democratic culture. Most major parties are built up around some sort of dynastic leadership and patronage networks rather than programmatic platforms. Shah (2014) notes that such an internal illiberalism prohibits parties from serving as true vehicles of various citizen interests. Rather, parties are vehicles of elite bargaining with the military. When the civilian leaders are in power, they focus on their own political survival through the distributive politics and usage of state resources for rewarding their loyalists rather than the building of robust and independent institutions essential for the consolidated democracy. As Diamond (2002) might suggest, this leads to a clientelistic democracy in which the electoral cycle becomes a kind of circular transition with the preservation of the power, while evading real accountability.

### 1.6 Mechanisms of Democratic Backsliding in Pakistan

#### 1.6.1 Civil - Military Power Asymmetry

The defining characteristic of the Pakistani state is, however, the lack of symmetry between civilians and the military. Despite the lack of an actual coup since 1999, the military is the ultimate arbiter of the political system. The fact that the military plays so much of a role in managing both foreign policy and internal security and civilian politicians

oversee service delivery is an example of hybrid management. Rizvi (2018) calls this "soft authoritarianism" more successful than direct rule, as it allows the military to exercise power without international shame. Shah (2014) goes on to explain that this asymmetry is institutionalised as a consequence of the economic interests of the military and its historical position as guardian of national interest, which provides its right to intervene in political deadlocks with notable public and judicial support.

### 1.6.2 Judicial Politics and Selective Accountability

The role of the judiciary in the democratic backsliding in Pakistan is paradoxical. While the Lawyers Movement of 2007 marked a breakthrough for the rule of law, superior courts have since been guilty of judicial overreach for partisan or establishment reasons. Shah (2014) argues that the application of *suu-mortu* powers and disqualification of prime ministers have made the court a supreme political player. These accountability mechanisms are selective; on the one hand civilian politicians constantly face scrutiny by the National Accountability Bureau, on the other hand, powerful actors within the state are relatively insulated from scrutiny. This form of lawfare is used to discredit democratic processes as judges can override electoral mandates based on security establishment preferences therefore reducing democratic space.

### 1.6.3 Media Control and the Reduction of Citizens

The deterioration of the public square has been a conspicuous symptom of backsliding in Pakistan. Once a thriving media landscape, the country now endures a systematic tightening of red lines of what is acceptable reporting. Freedom House (2024) reports that this is accomplished through some hybrid model of intimidation, including economic pressure through the withdrawal of government advertisements and physical harassment of journalists. Digital spaces are also limited by regulations on cybercrimes. V Muhamadaru et al at the V exposure diagram tool

(2024) For example, such measures lead to widespread self censoring such that 'the media no longer functions as a watch dog and thus public deliberation, crucial for democracy, is impaired's, as stated by V Dem Institute.

### 1.6.4 Erosion of Civil Liberties

The wider canvas of civil liberties in Pakistan has shrunk significantly, as found in new V- Dem reports. The state is increasingly using security-centred legislations to suppress the right to assemble and protest. Grassroots movements against the prevailing civil military status quo are often strangely criminalized and denied air. Bermeo (2016) refers to this securitization of dissent as characteristic of backsliding, in effect, a narrowing of legitimate political participation. Even mainstream opposition parties are subject to arbitrary bans on holding rallies insuring that any kind of mobilisation that threatens the hybrid equilibrium is neutralised, depriving the citizenry of not only the right to vote, but the substantive right to organise or dissent - an indicator of electoral authoritarianism.

### 1.7 Pakistan as a Stabilised Hybrid Regime

Synthesising persistent electoral cycles with mechanisms of institutional capture goes a long way in recognising Pakistan's turn into a stabilised hybrid regime. This constitutes a significant break from the label of fragile democracy given by international donors. In a stabilized hybrid regime, what lies in between democracy and autocracy is a permanent destination and not an ephemeral interlude. The state has mastered the management of democracy, as Levitsky & Way suggest: elections are held because they are indispensable for the stability of the regime - providing a pressure-relief valve for the grievances of the population and allowing the continued interaction with a global order that prefers democratic partners.

What distinguishes the hybridity of Pakistan is the decentralisation of authoritarian power. Unlike the hyper-presidentialism we have seen in Turkey or Hungary, power in Pakistan is diffused within a tripartite elite comprising military leadership, a

circulatory cabinet of the civilian powers, and an all-powerful judiciary. Shah (2014) points out that it is this hybridity by committee that makes the regime so resilient that when one of the tripod becomes unpopular, the other two re-balance the system without it collapsing. Thus Pakistan can witness a number of government changes without making any change in the structural nature of the regime. The establishment is the permanent manager of the political market as in Rizvi (2018). Comparatively, Pakistan has the competitive characteristics of the hybrid regimes in Southeast Asia, but it has a complex additional trait of praetorian culture which has been entrenched over the years. The military is not just a system actor but is the architect of system boundaries. This institutionalised hybridity renders political crises - such as dismissal of a prime minister - as not instances of collapse, but the immune response of the system to perceived threat. Consequently, according to Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019), the Pakistani model can be seen to establish how a regime can be highly unstable at the leader level, but highly stable at the structural level and how such a regime can meet the ambiguity between democracy and autocracy.

### 1.8 Implications of Democratic Theory and Practice

The Hybrid Nature Of Pakistans Future Pakistan has plagued by a constant hybrid regime has an enormous implication on how world views democracy. First, it provides a critical and definitive reflection on electoralism - that erroneous presumption that elections are the main measure of democratic health. Pakistan thus demonstrates the perverse outcome of elections as they can be adapted to serve purposes of authoritarian ends: in this case they serve as a cloak of legitimacy. For democratic theory this introduces the need for a return to substantive definitions with a focus on protecting civic space and institutional autonomy rather than on procedural voting. Schedler warns that in the absence of basic pre-conditions for a fair contest, elections become open instruments of authority as opposed to democratic launching pads.

In most ways, Pakistan tests the effectiveness of enhancing democracy in international efforts. Decades of endeavour focussed on technical fixes - such as election observer training - have not been sufficient if they do not address asymmetries of hard power within the state. Technically perfect election will nevertheless result in a hybrid election if the judiciary is compromised and the military has a policy veto right. Reform must thereby be aimed at power's distribution in organizational structures rather than only its mechanics in the ballot box.

Furthermore, the story of Pakistan highlights the potentially reversible nature of the democratic gains. Even after 10 years of civilian rule, a nation can revert to a soft authoritarian regime. Bermeo stresses the role of normative consolidation: in order for democracy to survive, the elites and the public both need to respect the rules contained in the social contract of democracy as sacrosanct. Pakistan's instrumental use of democratic institutions by all parties weakens the norm core of protection to the system. For practitioners, the lesson of this story is empowered: democracy does not become a destination in which the people operate as a result of elections nor is it a place one occupies but an endless struggle to privilege people's ability to revoke power. As Diamond would argue, however, without a strong civil society and the institutions of the independent, democratic machinery can easily be appropriated by autocratizing elites.

### 1.9 Conclusion:

In sum, this article claims that Pakistan has left behind the category of 'democracy in transition' and is now a stabilised hybrid regime. The fact that it has always been held in 2008, which is historic, has not proven fruitful for democratic consolidation. Instead it has been presiding over significant backsliding, with the managed political process, systematic erosion of media and civic freedoms and dominance of non-elected institutions over the civilian executive. Levitsky & Way and Schedler hypothesise that the Political order in Pakistan is characterised by a democratic facades hiding a deeply illiberal core,

in which the rules of the game are determined by informal power structures.

The future of Pakistan's political system is still disputed. While some claim that the present hybrid model is the only way to achieve stability, others believe that its lack of true democracy is the basis for its chronic instability. "Obviously we're not at an untenable stage in this direction [of elections but no representation], but I think both of us do the same that from a long-term perspective, it is not sustainable," Rizvi says. A true democratic think would require more than one more election; instead it would seek fundamental restructuring of the state to ensure the supremacy of the people with the neutrality of the judiciary. Ultimately, Pakistan is a key canary in the coal mine for the global democratic project. It depicts the survival of democratic forms and extinguishment of their spirit. For scholars, the Pakistani experience raises the danger that democracy is a delicate structure where vigilance is needed at all times. To see Pakistan only in the light of electoral continuity is to ignore a deeper reality of decay in democracy that V-Dem and Freedom House have identified. The challenge going forward will be to change the focus beyond the ballot box and address the structural bases of power at the root level of holding Pakistani democracy hostage.

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