

The Crisis of Democracy in Pakistan – The General Elections of February 2024

Rabya Arshad

Religion, Ethics, and Politics, Technische Universität Dortmund, Dortmund, North Rhine-Westphalia-Germany
Email address: rabya22arshad@gmail.com

Abstract— This paper aims to highlight the situation of democracy in Pakistan throughout the years, beginning from its independence. It discusses the role religion has played in its formation and the years that followed after that. This significant role paved way for the politicians of Pakistan to further use religion as a tool of manipulation in order to gain victory in elections. Moreover, the paper covers the democratic challenges that Pakistan has gone through and the role of Pakistani military in contributing to those challenges. It has been established in this paper that since Pakistan has had such limited opportunities to have a democratic government, thus even today it is facing challenges in maintaining a democratic nature. The general elections of 2024 – and the events that led to it – are a perfect example of those challenges. The delay in the election results and a victory that appeared to be rather forced made the democratic nature of Pakistan seem even more questionable.

Keywords— Constitution, democracy, elections, military, Pakistan, politics, political parties, religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of democracy in a country like Pakistan has always been quite vague. Pakistan was founded as a result of years of struggle and violence, in the hopes that once Muslims of the sub-continent have a nation of their own, they can freely exercise their religious values and their political freedom. However, this wasn't always the case. The journey of Democracy in Pakistan has faced numerous challenges which included periods of political instability, complete economic fallouts, military rules, and socio-religious upheavals. The general elections in Pakistan that took place in February 2024 have once again given room to raised concerns and extreme debates regarding where the democratic nature of the country lies and regarding the immensely dynamic and complex scenario at hand.

Pakistan's democratic evolution is closely linked to the period where the Muslims struggled to gain independence from the British colonizers. The war of Independence led to an end to the colonial rule of the British and gave birth to Pakistan, which was the first Islamic nation in history that adopted a parliamentary form of government at first and embraced democratic ideals. However, the emerging democracy quickly faced challenges that weakened its institutional and constitutional bases and called into question its democratic nature. Along with achieving a separate nation for themselves, Pakistan inherited multiple challenges in terms of its constitution, politics, geography, rivalries from neighbouring states, economy, culture, language, and so on (Ellahi & mahboob, 2001).

Many scholars believe that (among many other reasons) one dominant reason why Pakistan's democratic institutions are more prone towards failure is because every military ruler uses religion in order to achieve their goal of attaining power (Shafiq, 2020). Their attainment of power could be direct (through a martial law) or indirect (exercising their power on the background through democratic leaders on the front). Although it is interesting to note why politicians or the

military rulers feel so comfortable and confident while using the religion card on the Pakistani population, it cannot be denied that this technique of manipulation always seems to work on the people. It is perhaps an internal, subconscious conditioning in the minds of the Pakistani population to believe the people who appear to be religiously motivated, considering this is how the nation came into being. The founder of the nation Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah based his entire movement of freedom on the pretext of religion. What seemed to work for the leaders before for igniting passion and enthusiasm among people seems to be working pretty well now as well. The only difference is that the intentions of the leaders are not so innocent anymore. But nevertheless, they must be applauded for understanding the emotional mentality of the people of Pakistani, as it is quite convenient to make them believe white lies time and again under the façade of religion.

Since the beginning, the politics of Pakistan has been dominated by the military and the general public had been deprived of the chance to live in a democratic state. The first general elections in which the people got the opportunity to choose the representative for the state by casting a vote was in the year 1970. However, the democratic government that had come into existence in that year did not prevail for long. Democracy for Pakistan has gone through a bumpy ride, with the military coups being one of the major bumps, along with incompetence of the democratic rulers. The rulers of the democratic parties have always left room for the military powers to take over the state. That room was left through their infinite cases of corruption, unfulfilled promises, and complete disregard for the needs of the public. Hence it seems rather justified that even today, Pakistan's democratic roots are subsequently fragile.

The general elections of February 2024 in Pakistan seemed to highlight a very frail image of democracy, where the leader of the opposition party was imprisoned and his party not granted the right to hold campaigns; where the personal lives of party leaders were made public by the opposing parties

using the religion card; where parties were backhandedly being supported and opposed by establishments; and where it took days for the election results to be presented to the public. The national as well as international media has accused the winning party to have allegedly rigged the elections on a massive scale – a claim which has been supported through several events that pertained at the time. For instance, shutting down social media and mobile services in different parts of the country that resulted in limiting the public's communication and access with their polling agents; delaying the results of the elections for an extended period of time; confession of a senior official regarding manipulating poll results; or the election commission manipulating the Form-47 (that requires the Election commission to state the election results). The general public of Pakistan does not appear to be pleased with the election results or with the conditions in which the elections were held, along with the alleged electoral fraud and the kind of government that only appears to be a democracy.

II. THE POLITICAL TIMELINE OF PAKISTAN – DEMOCRACY VS DICTATORSHIP

Since it got liberated from the British colonial powers and became a new nation, there were no direct democratic elections in Pakistan till 1970 (Ghilzai, 2020). Pakistan has had several distinct forms of government since its formation i.e. presidential or the parliamentary systems of governance, democracy, and Martial law. Pakistan faced numerous challenges shortly after its creation such as lack of capable political leadership, immense refugee crisis, issues with the western and eastern wing being in alignment with each other, and the crisis of religious identity within the system of the state. Due to these issues, along with many others, it took Pakistan about 9 years to form its first constitution (Rizwan, Ahmad, & Bukhari, 2018). Under the first constitution of Pakistan, which was established in 1956, the country was declared to have a parliamentary system of government. Upon the implementation of the 1956 Constitution, there was a widespread anticipation for skilled administrators occupying key positions to address the pressing needs of the populace. It was believed that the dominance of seasoned politicians would diminish, thereby allowing a focus on combating corruption, initiating agrarian reforms, and fostering economic growth. However, things did not go as planned and the constitution was ratified. Martial law was declared in the country by General Ayub Khan in 1958 (Ashraf, Khan, Zaidi, Abbasi, & Affandi, 2023).

In 1962, Ayub Khan laid the groundwork for democracy in Pakistan with the introduction of the 1962 Constitution, which completely changed the spirit of the previous constitution and established a presidential system. However, this framework struggled to function effectively within the country due to pervasive issues such as corruption, manipulation of elections, and widespread nepotism. This situation highlighted the challenges of implementing democratic practices in environments where such systemic problems are prevalent, further complicating the political landscape in Pakistan. Under the 1962 Constitution, the balance of power was significantly tilted in favour of the President and his executive branch,

allowing them a dominant control over the legislative body. To further entrench their authority, military leaders enacted Orders granting themselves immunity from legal challenges. This effectively placed their actions, including the declaration of martial law, the roles of provincial Governors, and the operations of military courts, beyond the scrutiny of any legal or civilian oversight. The implications of such a framework for the judiciary were profound, leading to a constrained legal system under the shadow of authoritarian rule.

The governance style of Ayub Khan, marked by these authoritarian practices, eventually sparked widespread public dissent by late 1968. The culmination of nationwide protests, underpinned by the people's frustration and demand for change, saw major political factions uniting to call for Ayub Khan's resignation. Their demands included the reinstatement of a parliamentary system and the reestablishment of the four provinces in West Pakistan, while East Pakistan called for greater provincial autonomy and fair representation in the national legislature, proportional to its population. The escalating unrest and deteriorating law and order situation compelled Ayub Khan to step down. However, in a move that continued the cycle of military dominance, he transferred power to another military leader, Yahya Khan (Pardesi). On March 25, 1969, General Yahya Khan assumed the presidency, marking the onset of the country's second military regime by nullifying the 1962 Constitution, suspending all political activities (though not outlawing political parties), and disbanding both the National and Provincial Assemblies as he declared Martial Law across the nation. This decisive shift aimed to stabilize the nation by re-establishing law, order, and normalcy. Following these measures, the regime announced its intention to conduct the country's first general elections, which would be based on the principle of direct adult franchise, setting a precedent for democratic participation. This move was seen as a step towards restoring a semblance of democratic governance after a period of strict military control (Ellahi & mahboob, 2001).

In 1973, following the end of martial law, the new civilian administration introduced a fresh constitution, reinstating the parliamentary system of governance. This period saw Zulfikar Ali Bhutto becoming Pakistan's first elected Prime Minister to complete a full five-year tenure. However, the democratic trajectory took a downturn with General Zia-ul-Haq's imposition of martial law in July 1977, leading Pakistan into another spell of authoritarian rule that lasted until 1988. The political landscape saw a shift with Benazir Bhutto's election as Prime Minister in 1988 after Zia-ul-Haq's demise. Despite initial hopes, her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government was dismissed in 1990 amidst accusations of corruption and poor governance. The PPP briefly returned to power between 1993 and 1996 but was again ousted due to similar allegations (Ashraf, Khan, Zaidi, Abbasi, & Affandi, 2023).

During this tumultuous period, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) - PMLN - also held office from 1991 to 1993 and from 1997 until 1999. However, their governance too was cut short when General Musharraf assumed power through a military coup in October 1999. This ongoing cycle highlighted the challenges facing Pakistan's democratic institutions.

Despite these setbacks, President Musharraf vowed to establish a durable democracy capable of resisting military interventions. He promised advancements in human resource access, poverty alleviation, and improvements in basic services. Yet, many of these commitments remained unfulfilled. Similarly, political leaders across the board have pledged to prioritize national welfare upon election, but successive governments have struggled to address core issues affecting the population. As a result, many Pakistanis continue to face shortages in essential services, including food, water, energy, and healthcare, underscoring the persistent gap between political promises and the realities of governance.

III. DEMOCRATIC PARTY FAILURES: CATALYSTS FOR PAST MILITARY TAKEOVERS

Despite the consistent rhetoric from political parties advocating for the restoration of democracy during periods of dictatorship in Pakistan, genuine democratic principles have struggled to take root due to various factors. A prevalent issue in Pakistani politics is the frequent clashes and conflicts among governments, which hinder the establishment of cohesive democratic norms. The primary obstacle to the development of true democracy in Pakistan lies in the contradictory and undemocratic behaviors exhibited by political elites. Between 1988 and 1999, and again from 2008 to 2013, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) held power. Despite both parties, led by figures like Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, advocating for democracy's restoration, they often neglected the rights of the general public, particularly those of minorities, access to basic necessities, and the enforcement of the rule of law. Consequently, both parties inadvertently perpetuated undemocratic norms at societal and political levels (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018).

The military's significant role in Pakistani politics can be traced back to its early years, shaped by two key legacies. Firstly, there exists a pervasive belief within the military that civilians lack the competence to establish a sustainable and efficient government or effectively manage state affairs. This perception has fostered a self-identity among the military as the nation's primary protector, justifying their intervention in political matters under the guise of a 'doctrine of necessity.' This intervention extends to matters of leadership selection and both internal and external security concerns. Embracing a 'self-help' ethos, the military has also carved out reserved domains within public policies, including engaging in its own business ventures, often referred to as "milbus," which serve the personal interests of military personnel. Furthermore, the military has pursued a foreign policy independent of civilian oversight, fostering direct relationships with entities such as the United States, thereby establishing autonomy over its organizational affairs. Secondly, recognizing the impracticality of indefinite military rule, the armed forces seek to maintain influence within the decision-making process. The choice of unelected civilian leaders to continue the colonial diarchical government system, which includes both the

bureaucracy and the military as central pillars, not only drew the military into the political arena, but also laid the foundation for the "Troika" system. This power-sharing arrangement between military and civilian elements became ingrained in Pakistani politics following 1972. These intertwined legacies have contributed to the military's enduring involvement in politics, driven by its perception of civilian institutional frailty and its aim to preserve its influence in the governance of the nation (Muneer & Aryal, 2024).

In Pakistan, the fundamental issue does not lie in the democratic system itself but rather in the autocratic tendencies exhibited by governments and leaders. Politicians frequently fail to fulfil their promises upon assuming power. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, for instance, professed a commitment to democracy's restoration, yet his administration struggled to address pressing issues affecting the common citizen, such as poverty, unemployment, and the energy crisis. A significant factor contributing to the failure of political parties in Pakistan is the substantial communication gap that exists between political leaders and the general public (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018). This divide has been persistent throughout the country's history, regardless of whether civil or military leaders have been in power. Despite the professed support for democracy by the majority of political figures, there is often a lack of genuine interest in fostering the development and advancement of democratic principles within Pakistan's political landscape, which has long suffered from democratic deficits. Political leaders frequently prioritize electoral victories and gaining public support during campaigning, yet once they ascend to power, they tend to distance themselves from the everyday concerns and needs of the common citizens. This detachment exacerbates the sheer disconnect between the ruling elite and the broader population, leading to a sense of alienation and disillusionment among the electorate.

Moreover, the absence of effective channels for dialogue and engagement between political leaders and the public further widens this communication gap. The failure of political parties to establish robust mechanisms for ongoing communication and feedback from citizens perpetuates a cycle of disconnect and disengagement, ultimately undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance. Furthermore, systemic issues such as corruption, nepotism, and vested interests often divert the attention of political leaders away from addressing the genuine needs and aspirations of the populace. This prioritization of self-interest over public welfare erodes trust in the democratic process and creates fertile ground for military interventions, as disillusioned citizens may view the military as a more viable alternative to address their grievances and restore stability. In essence, the failure of political parties to bridge the communication gap and prioritize the genuine advancement of democratic norms and behaviors contributes significantly to the recurring cycles of democratic failure and military takeovers in Pakistan. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for building a more inclusive and responsive political system that genuinely serves the interests of all citizens.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF 2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan were a pivotal moment in the nation's political landscape, characterized by controversies, protests, and considerable political ambiguity. The electoral process was marred by various challenges, including accusations of electoral misconduct, post-election demonstrations, and the complexities of forming a new government (Khaliq, 2024). But most importantly, their significance can be judged through the crucial circumstance that were prevalent in the country.

Major political parties in Pakistan persistently sought to delay the elections, revealing their lack of commitment to the democratic process and overlooking the damage such attitudes inflict on democracy itself (Masood, 2024). The arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 9th, 2023, marked another disheartening chapter in Pakistan's democratic journey. Khan, ousted from office the previous year through a parliamentary vote of no confidence and surviving an assassination attempt, had garnered significant political backing nationwide. Unfortunately, Khan's arrest added to the pattern witnessed in Pakistan's political landscape, where the majority of former prime ministers have faced indictments or imprisonment post their tenures. This trend reflects a recurring theme: the dominance of the Pakistan Army's influence, which tends to persist regardless of the circumstances.

Imran Khan's ascent to power in 2018 with the tacit support of the Army and his subsequent removal in 2022 upon losing that backing exemplify this dynamic. The recent political upheaval coincided with substantial economic challenges. Even before severe flooding devastated large swathes of agricultural land, the economy was already grappling with alarming inflation rates, reported as the highest in fifty years, alongside escalating food and energy shortages. Investment inflows had dwindled, and exports were on a downward trajectory, with Pakistan facing an imminent risk of defaulting on its debt obligations.

Against this backdrop, the coalition government preceding the 2024 general elections, helmed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of the PML-N, alongside other major political entities except Khan's PTI, formed under the banner of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), struggled to address the crisis. Stalled negotiations with the International Monetary Fund underscored the urgency for parliamentary approval of a new budget to stabilize the economy.

The most viable solution to navigate this crisis appeared to be holding elections. Elections could serve as a release valve for public discontent, diverting attention from the military establishment back to civilian politicians. Moreover, a newly elected government would possess the legitimacy required to enact crucial economic policies and weather potential backlash resulting from austerity measures. Furthermore, elections could facilitate dialogue between political leaders and the military, fostering confidence in Pakistan's institutions (Schwemlein, 2023).

While the military-dominated structure historically

intervened in electoral processes to influence outcomes, transparent and timely elections devoid of interference could have instilled trust in the democratic process. The reluctance to uphold democratic principles likely stemmed from apprehensions about the potential electoral outcomes, underscoring the enduring struggle to safeguard democracy in Pakistan.

V. KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR AGENDAS

In the run-up to the 2024 general elections, the political landscape of Pakistan is dominated by three significant figures: Imran Khan of the PTI, Nawaz Sharif representing the PML-N, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari from the PPP.

Founded in 1996 by Imran Khan, the PTI emerged on the political scene with a strong anti-corruption stance. Khan's leadership gradually garnered popularity, propelling the party to power in 2018 for its first term. However, by 2022, Khan's fortunes had declined significantly, leading to his ouster, attributed largely to lost military support. Since August 2023, Khan has faced legal challenges, including imprisonment over various charges (Patel, 2024). PTI's election platform is inspired by the principles of the Islamic welfare state, mirroring the ethos of Madinah with a strong commitment to Islamic values, justice, governance, and the rule of law.

The party announced its intention to introduce amendments to the constitution to further its vision. PTI's strategy included the formation of a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" aimed at fostering national unity by addressing the country's divisions. The manifesto outlined plans to widen the tax base and enhance healthcare accessibility through the expansion of the Health Card scheme, ensuring free healthcare nationwide. Additionally, PTI aimed to standardize the education system across all regions. A key focus of PTI's policy was on strengthening accountability mechanisms to combat corruption effectively. This includes the creation of provincial anti-corruption units, the formation of an elite academy dedicated to fighting corruption, and a commitment to tackle white-collar crime rigorously.

Khan has publicly criticized the military, alleging targeted attacks against him, including an assassination attempt. This conflict has sparked significant discussion about its potential to mark a shift in Pakistani politics towards greater independence from military influence. In 2023, tensions escalated as Khan's supporters clashed with military installations, resulting in widespread arrests, a ban from national television for Khan, and a sentence of 10 years in prison for allegedly leaking state secrets.

This scenario paved the way for Shehbaz Sharif and the PML-N, a party with a long history of governance focused on conservative and business sectors since the 1980s. The party, having been in power several times, is known for its economic and infrastructural reforms. Nawaz Sharif, after being ousted and living in exile following a corruption scandal revealed by the Panama Papers and a subsequent conviction, has made a controversial return to Pakistan with military support, leading to speculation about his political future. Under Shehbaz

Sharif's leadership, PML-N outlined an ambitious agenda prioritizing economic revitalization, with a keen focus on spurring economic growth through structural reforms, enhancing the energy sector, and broadening infrastructure development. The party committed to tackling inflation and unemployment head-on, aiming to generate over 10 million new jobs and reduce the national poverty rate from 38% to 25% within a five-year span.

PML-N also set forth ambitious economic targets, including achieving a 6% annual GDP growth rate, boosting annual exports to \$60 billion, and increasing yearly remittances from overseas Pakistanis to \$40 billion. Additionally, the party proposed a reduction in electricity tariffs by 20-30%, the addition of 15,000MW of power to the national grid, and the launch of a comprehensive 10,000MW solar energy project across the country. In its policy blueprint, PML-N also highlighted its intention to foster stronger relations with China, offer tax relief to the industrial sector, and improve the country's tax-to-GDP ratio from 10.4% to 13.5% by 2029. Moreover, the party planned to move forward with the privatization of underperforming State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) as part of its broader strategy to streamline the economy and enhance efficiency (Web Desk, 2024).

The PPP, founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967, remains a key player with a legacy of leadership within the Bhutto family, including Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari. Now, their son Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is set to run for Prime Minister, representing the party's progressive platform despite facing challenges related to corruption allegations (Patel, 2024). The election platform of the PPP was dedicated to enhancing social welfare, with significant attention on eradicating poverty and hunger, safeguarding minority and marginalized community rights, and reinforcing national unity. The party's vision for a revitalized people-centric economy rested on five critical foundations: achieving economic stability, boosting both public and private investments, safeguarding the economically vulnerable, rectifying fiscal disparities, and efficient management of national debt and international financial resources.

Highlights from their manifesto include a promise to double the real income of wage earners within five years, supply 300 units of electricity at no charge to the most financially disadvantaged households, and leverage renewable energy sources like solar and wind. The PPP also planned to build three million homes for female household heads, guaranteed free primary healthcare services, and introduced several social welfare cards - kissan/hari cards for agricultural workers, mazdoor cards for laborers, and youth cards for the younger population. Furthermore, they proposed the enactment of a Right to Food Act, alongside initiating a complimentary nutritional program for pregnant and new mothers, lasting 1000 days (Web Desk, 2024).

Each party brought distinct visions and historical baggage to the 2024 elections, setting the stage for a highly contested political battle in Pakistan.

VI. RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION IN POLITICS

Since Pakistan's founding, officials have used religion as a tool and marketed it as a healing salve for a range of illnesses plaguing its severely troubled populace. Now ingrained in popular perception, the notion of Pakistan as a land of purity for Muslims helps Islamists and populists gain electoral victory. Islam is becoming an integral component of Pakistani politics on a daily basis as a result of the aggressive silencing of liberal, secular, and progressive voices in this environment (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). The politicians of this country are well aware with the mentality of the general public. They know religion is their weakest point, hence they do not hesitate to hit the people where it would impact them the most.

Since independence, the "religious card" has been a staple of Pakistan's political system. It was adopted into the Constitution in 1956, and since then, it has been utilized by religious parties and certain anti-democratic groups to overthrow democratic administrations. The strongest indicator of how and why this card was successfully utilized in Pakistan, despite the inability of these parties and groupings to garner electoral support, is the country's political past. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was founded in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In response to criticism from left-wing leaders, the party changed its slogan from "socialism to Islamic socialism" in order to appeal to a wider audience (Abbas, 2019). Most of the times in Pakistan's history, the religion card has been used not only to win votes and gain voters' sympathies, but to also turn the public against the opposing parties (which in most cases are the elected parties).

The opposition's stance on PTI's leader Imran Khan is that he mainly used religion in his politics to in the hearts of public, considering how unreligious his life used to be before coming into politics. Khan, who was a well-known global figure and a privileged Pakistani, had lived a predominantly "Western lifestyle" for the majority of his childhood. Because of his actions, he gained the reputation as a "playboy" in the 1980s and was frequently featured in tabloids. Khan "re-discovered" his Muslim roots after entering politics, and he progressively modified his viewpoint, manner of speaking, and even his remarks regarding Islamic dress (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Khan was a "reformist" populist in his early years, and his lack of political experience made him stand out as a special leader. Along with his cries for corruption and opposition to the status quo, he attracted a tiny but devoted following. He adopted a traditional, Muslim demeanor as part of his survival strategy in Pakistan's strict environment.

Khan transcended Islamism and gave his discourse a "clash of civilizations" dimension, pitting the West against Muslims, within this framework of Islamist populism. He defended the Afghan Taliban by calling them "good." He views the Afghan Taliban as fighters for freedom from "foreign" occupiers (Afzal, 2019). For the 2018 election campaign, Khan came up with the concept of "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan), which incorporates all facets of PTI's populism and mostly relies on Islamist civilizationism. Based on this notion, Khan paints an

image of a perfect Pakistan in which Islam serves as a role model for all facets of life and the powerful and corrupt are nonexistent. There is an Islamic welfare and justice system in place, and young people embrace Islamic beliefs and are not "misguided" by Western notions. The nation became the symbol of Islam and fiercely opposed anything deemed "unIslamic." Adopting the "true" principles of Islam is meant to solve every problem Pakistan faces and establishing a homeland and national identity for the people of Islamist civilization (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021).

PTI presented their populist vision of a New Pakistan based on Riyasat-e-Madina, the first Islamic state of Madinah, with the evident hope of winning a national majority. This reformist vision of Islamist populism is based on Islamic welfare. As a populist leader, Khan gained the moniker "U-turn Khan" for making impractical promises that did not come to pass (Mumtaz, 2021).

In Pakistan's history, anytime religion has been inculcated with politics, the country has had to suffer. Pakistan's democratic values have been badly undermined by the exploitation of the religion card. Politicians can consolidate power by winning over conservative members of society by appealing to religious sentiments. Pakistan's prosperity and development have been hampered by the preference for religious discourse over important policy matters. Instead of concentrating on long-term development objectives, political leaders who are fighting for power frequently adopt populist policies. As a result, important concerns like healthcare, education, and economic expansion are neglected. The nation's ability to solve urgent socioeconomic issues is hampered by the ongoing abuse of the religion card, which stifles the country's potential for growth and prosperity (Shahbaz, 2023).

In the 2024 general elections, PTI leader Imran Khan was hit with several court cases which aimed at ensuring his defeat in the elections. One of the cases made against him was purely on religious basis, which most fractions of the society consider to be immoral as it shows manipulation of religious values for the purpose of electoral victory and personal vendetta by the opposition. The former prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, and his spouse, Bushra Bibi, were both given seven-year sentences by a provincial court in Pakistan for a marriage that the court deemed to be against Islam. Following his conviction in the "iddat" case for marrying Bibi again before the 40-day waiting period following their divorce, Khan and his supporters maintain that the case was brought against him and his spouse for the sole purpose of defaming and embarrassing them, even in the name of Islam (Baloch, 2024).

VII. THE LONG AWAITED ELECTION RESULTS

The anticipation surrounding this election was high, with many expecting a decisive victory for former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had recently returned from a four-year exile in London. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party (PML-N) enjoyed favoritism from the military, tilting the odds significantly in its direction. Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, once backed by the military until his

ousting from office in April 2022, found himself incarcerated since August 2023. Khan's disqualification from contesting in this election cycle further underscored the shifting dynamics. Just days before the election, Khan received lengthy prison sentences in three separate cases, including charges of leaking state secrets and involvement in unlawful marriage (Afzal, 2024). Observers noted instances of transparency breaches during polling, although there was notable improvement during the subsequent vote counting and tabulation phases. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) came under fire for its decisions, including the prohibition of the PTI from utilizing its electoral symbol and the postponement of elections. The military establishment faced accusations of significant pre-election manipulation in favour of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) and its leader, Nawaz Sharif. Various candidates levelled accusations of vote manipulation, citing the delays in the final results announcement as evidence of foul play (Khaliq, 2024).

The election symbol of Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was declared unconstitutional by Pakistan's Supreme Court in January, dealing a serious blow to the party. As a result, neither the party name nor its well-known emblem—the cricket bat, which honors Khan's illustrious history as Pakistan's cricket team captain—were present on the ballots. As a result, all PTI contenders were forced to file as independents. Election symbols are quite important in a nation where almost forty percent of people do not read or write. The decision also has broader ramifications: a party lacking an official emblem runs the risk of its candidates being stolen after the election and is unable to claim seats designated for women and minorities. For the previous year, PTI had already been subjected to a harsh crackdown by the state; this decision made matters worse. In the run-up to the election, the party battled media blackout and campaign restrictions, thousands of party members were imprisoned, and senior leadership was forced to leave politics. As a result, on Election Day, the candidate and party supported by the military seemed destined to win.

Nonetheless, the outcome of Pakistan's 2024 elections left many surprised. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan and previously in power until April 2022, was widely anticipated to suffer defeat amid allegations of coercion and harassment by security forces over the past year. Imran Khan himself has been incarcerated since August of the preceding year, having recently received a 14-year sentence for corruption and being barred from holding public office for five years. Despite these challenges, the PTI managed to secure the most seats in the Pakistan National Assembly in the recent elections. This marks the first instance where the established political entities – notably Pakistan's influential military, along with the judiciary, bureaucracy, and mainstream political parties – failed to orchestrate an electoral triumph together (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024).

In his article, Yaqoob Khan Bangash states, "Despite the fact that Pakistan has now completed three parliamentary terms of five years each, democracy has not progressed in the country" (Bangash, 2024). The anti-establishment stance adopted by the PMLN and PPP under the Charter of

Democracy endured for just over a decade. However, upon losing power at the center in 2018, both parties succumbed to the pressures of the Imran Khan-led government and readily embraced the establishment's support once again by 2022. This dramatic shift, particularly by parties that have historically faced adversity due to their defiance of the establishment, warrants careful consideration and deeper analysis. It underscores the complexities and limitations of maintaining an anti-establishment position in Pakistan's political landscape. Furthermore, the PTI's purported anti-establishment stance appears to be contingent solely on the establishment's opposition to Imran Khan. If circumstances were to change, the PTI may well align itself with the establishment once more. These developments reflect the rapidly evolving nature of politics in Pakistan, where populist and neo-fascist ideologies are gaining traction.

Many were taken aback by the results of the days-long election, which showed that Khan's PTI-backed candidates had won the greatest number of parliamentary seats but not an outright majority. The party claims that if it weren't for supposed government meddling, it would have won more seats. Party officials cited notable disparities between results from polling places and results at the constituency level, as well as mysterious delays in the vote counting process and sudden stops in the results broadcast on election night. Furthermore, significant lead in votes that some candidates had on election night disappeared by the next morning. This time around, the military's tried-and-true strategy for influencing Pakistan's political climate didn't seem to work. Pakistan's two dynastic parties, the PML-N and PPP, came in last with 75 and 54 legislative seats, respectively. The second- and third-largest parties in parliament, the PML-N and PPP, came together once more to form a coalition government (Afzal, 2024).

Through both legal challenges and public demonstrations, the PTI disputed the results of the election. Many parties have accused each other of electoral fraud, leading to demands for inquiries from the media, Western governments, and civil society organizations. However, given Pakistan's long history of close judicial system alignment with the state, these requests are likely to encounter pushback. In the end, the unexpected outcome of Election Day does matter if the military is successful in establishing a feeble coalition government through an election tainted by claims of irregularities. Pakistan's populace is growing more agitated and unsatisfied, and their faith in the system is being further undermined. Notwithstanding the military's attempts to suppress the PTI, the electorate's strong response highlights the significance of their votes and suggests a change in the political landscape. Future election results will probably be influenced by this increased political consciousness, which could also cause more instability while the incoming coalition administration works to resolve these issues.

VIII. FUTURE PROSPECTS OF DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN

The highly controversial elections in 2024 cast a shadow over the future of democracy in Pakistan, raising serious concerns about the integrity of the electoral process and the

prospects for genuine democratic governance. The widespread allegations of electoral fraud, interference by state authorities, and manipulation of the electoral system undermine the foundation of democracy and erode public trust in the political institutions. In the aftermath of such elections, the trajectory of democracy in Pakistan appears uncertain. The persistence of electoral malpractices and the entrenched influence of powerful non-democratic actors, such as the military establishment, pose significant challenges to the consolidation of democratic norms and institutions. The continued dominance of dynastic politics and the manipulation of electoral outcomes further weaken the prospects for a vibrant and inclusive democratic system. Moreover, the erosion of democratic values and institutions not only undermines the credibility of the electoral process but also threatens the stability and legitimacy of the government. The lack of accountability and transparency in the electoral process fosters disillusionment among the populace and exacerbates political polarization and social unrest.

The leadership of Pakistan must understand that elections offer a chance to break through the politics of division and polarization and demonstrate a sincere commitment to democracy and human rights, not just to seize power (Gossman, 2024). On February 8, 2024, general elections were held in Pakistan. Elections in 2024 were a historic event since the nation's election cycle was severely disrupted in January 2023 due to multiple political crises, which raised doubts about democracy's ability to survive. Thus, it's excellent news that Pakistani democracy hasn't gone extinct. Still, there are a ton of lessons to be learned from the results of the elections in 2024. Some believe that the establishment, which once successfully manipulated the nation's electoral map by combining ruling parties, is no longer able to do so. One interpretation of this would be that the country's fossilized power structure and antiquated political system are becoming tiresome to the majority of its citizens. Either this or Pakistani society has outgrown the institutions and processes that have failed to provide improved services to its residents over the past seventy-six years (Khan, 2024).

The continuance of an electoral process that has historically been the target of political manipulation by Pakistan's security-oriented state is what gives the 2024 elections their true significance. Even the slight progress made on the "democratic" front would have been lost if there had been more delays in the process, no matter how flawed. Until Pakistan's politicians understand the significance of winning in the larger picture, democracy will remain an elusive dream. Similar to other parts of the world, Pakistan is still experiencing the conflict between authoritarianism and democracy. The election process needs to be allowed to go unhindered and free from excessive interference from intelligence services if it is to be reinforced and its quality raised. Pakistan's 2024 elections were inevitable considering the political impasse brought about by the government's conflict with the PTI. However, the outcome has led to yet another deadlock that can worsen the nation's political situation. Thus, although for all the wrong reasons, having elections was a step in the right direction (Jalal, 2024).

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the recent electoral events in Pakistan paint a nuanced picture of the country's democratic journey, fraught with challenges and opportunities alike. The recurring theme of electoral irregularities, as evidenced in the highly contested elections of 2024, serves as a stark reminder of the persistent obstacles that hinder the consolidation of democratic governance. Moreover, the influence of non-democratic actors, such as the military establishment, and allegations of fraud have raised fundamental questions about the integrity of the electoral process and the sustainability of democratic norms in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the exploitation of religious sentiments and identities for political gains has been a recurring phenomenon, often leading to polarization, sectarianism, and intolerance. The instrumentalization of religion in electoral campaigns not only undermines the principles of secularism and pluralism but also exacerbates societal divisions and undermines the credibility of democratic institutions. Forming an involvement of religion within the political structure of Pakistan has never worked in the country's favour.

However, amidst these challenges, there are also signs of resilience and hope. Civil society organizations, human rights activists, and democratic forces continue to advocate for electoral reform, transparency, and accountability. Despite an immense state of hopelessness and uncertainty regarding the credibility of the elections, the people of Pakistan still came forward to cast their votes. This level of enthusiasm shown by the general public shows that the nation is not dead in its spirits. The people of Pakistan still have something to fight for.

International scrutiny and pressure can also play a crucial role in holding the authorities accountable and promoting democratic principles. Moving forward, meaningful reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of electoral malpractice, strengthening democratic institutions, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability are imperative. This includes measures to curb the influence of non-democratic actors, ensure the independence of electoral bodies, and promote civic education and engagement. Moreover, efforts to combat religious manipulation and promote interfaith harmony are essential for fostering a more inclusive and tolerant society.

Ultimately, the future of democracy in Pakistan hinges on the collective determination of its citizens, political leaders, and institutions to uphold democratic values, protect fundamental rights, and ensure that the will of the people is reflected in free, fair, and credible elections. Despite the challenges and setbacks, the pursuit of democracy remains a shared aspiration that holds the promise of a brighter and more inclusive future for Pakistan. It is through sustained efforts, both domestically and internationally, that Pakistan can overcome its democratic challenges and realize its full potential as a democratic nation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abbas, M. (2019, October 7). Use of 'religious card' in politics. The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/537808-use-of-religious-card-in-politics>
- [2] Afzal, M. (2019, October 14). Imran Khan's incomplete narrative on the Taliban. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/imran-khans-incomplete-taliban-narrative/>
- [3] Afzal, M. (2024, February 29). Pakistan's surprising and marred 2024 election, and what comes next. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistans-surprising-and-marred-2024-election-and-what-comes-next/>
- [4] Ashraf, J., Khan, M. N., Zaidi, M. N., Abbasi, R., & Affandi, W. (2023). Pakistan's Democratic Governance Issues in the Twenty-First Century. *International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Science*, 7(9), 37-42.
- [5] Baloch, S. M. (2024, February 3). Imran Khan and his wife sentenced in 'un-Islamic' marriage case. The Observer. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/03/imran-khan-wife-bushra-bibi-sentenced-pakistan-marriage-case>
- [6] Bangash, Y. K. (2024, February 14). Was There Anything Truly Historic About Pakistan's 2024 Elections? The Wire. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/was-there-anything-truly-historic-about-pakistans-2024-elections>
- [7] Bibi, F., Jameel, S., & Jalal, S. U. (2018). What is Democracy? Challenges for Democracy in Pakistan. *Global Political Review (GPR)*, III(1), 66-75.
- [8] Ellahi, M., & Mahboob, H. (2001). Historical Review of Democratic Process in Pakistan: A Qualitative Approach for Policy Analysis, 76-105.
- [9] Ghilzai, S. A. (2020). History of Pakistanis' Power Politics-from 1947 to 2020-through the Critical Lenses of Cartoonists- Analysis of Political Cartoons. *European Academic Research*, VIII(3), 1373-1398.
- [10] Gossman, P. (2024, February 6). Pakistan Needs More Than Elections To Be a Democracy. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/06/pakistan-needs-more-elections-be-democracy>
- [11] Jalal, A. (2024, February). Inside Pakistan's Deeply Flawed Election. *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/inside-pakistans-deeply-flawed-election/>
- [12] Khaliq, F. (2024). The 2024 Pakistani General Elections: Controversies, Protests, and Political Uncertainty. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12224.92167>
- [13] Khan, Z. (2024, March 6). Democracy hasn't become a dinosaur (Thankfully!). Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. <https://www.freiheit.org/pakistan/democracy-hasnt-become-dinosaur-thankfully>
- [14] Masood, T. (2024, January 10). How important are the elections? The Tribune Express.
- [15] Mumtaz, A. (2021, January 16). PTI govt's failures on foreign, local fronts a lesson for electorate. 24 News. <https://www.24newshd.tv/16-Jan-2021/pti-govt-s-failures-on-foreign-local-fronts-a-lesson-for-electorate>
- [16] Muneer, S., & Aryal, S. K. (2024, February 28). Cause and Effect: The Factors that Make Pakistan's Military a Political Force. ORF Observer Research Foundation.
- [17] Naseemullah, A., & Chhibber, P. (2024, February 19). The Moral Meaning of Pakistan's 2024 General Elections. MHRC LUMS. <https://mhrc.lums.edu.pk/moral-meaning-pakistans-2024-general-elections>
- [18] Pardi, Y. Y. (n.d.). An Analysis of the Constitutional Crisis in Pakistan (1958-1969). *The Dialogue*, VII(4), 375-392.
- [19] Patel, M. (2024, February 6). What the 2024 Pakistan election means for the country's shaky political history. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/what-the-2024-pakistan-election-means-for-the-countrys-shaky-political-history-9146653/>
- [20] Rizwan, M., Ahmad, M., & Bukhari, S. A. (2018). Constitutional Dilemma of Pakistan: 1947 -1956. *Global Legal Studies Review*, 1-9.
- [21] Schwemlein, J. (2023, May 10). The Military Disrupts Pakistan's Democracy Once Again. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [22] Shafiq, O. (2020). Democracy in Pakistan.
- [23] Shahbaz, M. (2023, June 14). Exploiting the Religion Card: Politics in Pakistan. The Dayspring. <https://www.thedayspring.com.pk/exploiting-the-religion-card-politics-in-pakistan/>

- [24] Shakil, K., & Yilmaz, I. (2021). Religion and Populism in the Global South: Islamist Civilisationism of Pakistan's Imran Khan. Religions.
- [25] Web Desk. (2024, February 4). Election 2024: Here's an overview of PPP, PML-N, PTI manifestos. The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1154541-election-2024-heres-an-overview-of-ppp-pml-n-pti-manifestos>