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**Civil-military relations in Pakistan during the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the so-called  
 'Decade of Democracy:' A critical study  
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**Abstract**

*This paper critically examines civil-military relations in Pakistan from the second half of the 20th century, focusing on the so-called "Decade of Democracy" (1988-1999). It traces the military-bureaucratic dominance inherited from colonial structures, marked by weak political parties and repeated interventions through figures like Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, and Zia-ul-Haq. Zia's Eighth Amendment (Article 58(2)(b)) institutionalized presidential powers to dismiss governments, enabling hybrid authoritarianism where civilians held office without real authority. It also highlights some of the most important factors leading to military's dominance. The analysis frames the 1988-1999 period post-Zia's death as a flawed democratic experiment rather than genuine consolidation. Benazir Bhutto's PPP and Nawaz Sharif's PML-N governments faced elite polarization, patronage politics, and military vetoes over defense, foreign policy, nuclear decisions, and the 1999 Kargil conflict, culminating in Musharraf's coup. The paper summarizes that Pakistan's civil-military dynamics reflect institutional legacies favoring praetorianism over democratic dispensation.*

**Keywords:** *Civil-military relations, praetorianism, colonial legacy, 'Decade of Democracy,' political polarization*

**Introduction**

A notable feature of Pakistan's institutional history is the military-bureaucracy's predatory hold over the civilian political system. Upon gaining independence in 1947, the British rulers transferred to Pakistan an administrative model of a centralized state. Pakistan's model of state formation centered on the military and civil services, while the political parties, including the Muslim League, were desultory and ideologically fragmented. This asymmetry in governance structure allowed the military to assume a dominant role in governance. The military's governance, particularly the coup of 1958, was—and still is—justified by the 'doctrine of necessity' to the extent that judicial bodies routinely uphold the imperative of state power and political order—what can be dubbed as state power and political order orchestration. This set of conditions, which prevailed during the thirty years preceding the so-called 'Decade of Democracy', guaranteed the military's overwhelmingly unchallenged predominance as the principal axis of coercion and power, institutional control, ideological hegemony, and control over the national economy in Pakistan.

The period from 1988 until 1999 is often referred to as the 'Decade of Democracy' in Pakistan; this was the time that marked an important, albeit thin, shift the country was about to embrace. It was the time after the death of General Zia-ul-Haq when his plane crashed in August 1988. The country revived its parliamentary system of governance and witnessed the ascendancy of Benazir Bhutto, the first female head of government in the Islamic world. A drawn-out period for democracy was already in place, characterized by 'office holding without power.' Article 58(2)(b),

introduced in 1985 through the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution empowered the president to dissolve elected governments. Four elected governments were dismissed by the president exercising his powers provided by this article, and between 1996 and 1988, the president was, in fact, a proxy of the establishment within a managed 'hybrid' authoritarian system.

In this hybrid framework, the political elite, encased in civility, along with the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) with Benazir Bhutto as its head and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) with Nawaz Sharif leading, were unable to construct a viable civilian order. Deeming complex institutional reforms or the construction of segment party frameworks unnecessary, both leaders essentially utilized patronage systems and personalized leadership, engaging in aggressive, confrontational, and zero-sum bargaining confrontations with their political competitors. This elite polarization and short-term focus on immediate redistributive gains, as opposed to long-term institutional development, worsened the already fragile condition of democratic leaders, leading to failure in the civilian effort. This resulted in repeated failures to legitimize the military and give it the chance to supersede.

Additionally, this period of democratic rule was also marked by important "policy" events which most clearly exposed the military's prerogatives and the associated veto power. The components of national defense, foreign policy, and the military's nuclear policy remained the exclusive domain of the military and, at best, received tokenistic input from civilians. The 1998 nuclear tests (the Chagai tests) and the Kargil conflict of 1999 serve as the most prominent examples of this disconnect. In both instances, the civilian government publicly asserted to possess full ownership over the decisions, while the reality was that the military had complete operational control. The Kargil conflict, particularly, marked a paramount rupture in civil-military relations, as it sped up the decay and lowered the threshold of 'bridges' for General Pervez Musharraf to cross for his coup in October 1999. This coup marked the end of an extended period of civilian rule.

The instability within Pakistan was coupled with multi-dimensional global nexus at the time. The geopolitical realities—perpetual hostility with India, the Afghan Jihad's unfinished business from the 1980s, and the never-ending legacy of being on the American frontline—defaulted to deepened militarized structures. The military was—and is still—considered a "trusted partner" in security relations and therefore was able to engage with international actors directly, bypassing other governance structures, including the elected civilian governments, to a large extent. In addition, the financial and political bargaining power of civilian governments in relation to the autonomous military establishment was severely undercut by the rampant economic vulnerabilities, the high defense spending (over 5 percent of GDP for decades), and the financial conditionalities imposed by the international community (IMF/World Bank) post-nuclear sanctions in 1998. The internationalized and highly constrained environment explains that the democratic transition between 1988 and 1999 was a predisposition to failure.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Civil-military relations (CMR) are an old pillar of research in political science and comparative politics. In mature democracies, military forces, such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom, are accountable to civilian authority. However, in several post-colonial states, the military has emerged as the primary political player (Huntington, 1957; Finer, 1962). Their divergence is primarily evident in the maturation of the institutional structure: advanced democracies have effectively institutionalized structures of accountability, whereas nascent states tend to rely on the military to provide security, thereby granting the military, by default, the legal authority to determine political legitimacy. Such a comparative prism is necessary to

understand why Pakistan took a praetorian course, and India entrenched parliamentary supremacy despite the parallel colonial histories (Wilkinson, 2015).

There are classical theories such as the ones introduced by Huntington (1957) which emphasized the need for professional autonomy in the military, and Janowitz (1960) which recommended a constabulary model in which armed forces were integrated into the broader functions of society. Subsequent contributions to the field by scholars like Finer (1962) placed greater emphasis on the military as an interventionist force, especially in weak democracies. In addition to these contributions, later scholarships have underscored the way military institutions in postcolonial nations tend to transform into political entities on their own. Desch (1999) emphasized the impact of external security environments on military autonomy formation, whereas Stepan (1988) examined the institutionalization of military prerogatives by authoritarian states.

These models prove instrumental in framing the Pakistani course, as its habitual alternation between civilian and military rule defies the expectations of democratic consolidation. Desch's theoretical insights succinctly explains as why the military in Pakistan, which was under a constant rivalry with India, a Kashmir conflict that could not be resolved, and even insecurities in the region, continuously increased its responsibilities beyond defense. Therefore, the problem of CMR in Pakistan should be viewed through a two-pronged lens of insufficient domestic institutional strength and the persistent perception of an external threat.

### ***South Asia and Divergent Political Trajectories***

The experience of Pakistan cannot be taken in isolation and has to be placed in broader South Asian context. India's national experience shares similarities with institutions of colonialism, characterized by deep-rooted civilian dominance and the development of democratic strength through the establishment of the military as a fixed component of parliamentary checks and balances (Wilkinson, 2015). Civilian supremacy in India was institutionalized in India due to the Nehruvian agreement and the mass-integrative system of the Congress party which ensured that the military would remain politically neutral (Jaffrelot, 2004).

On the contrary, Bangladesh went through repeated coups and military takeovers, which highlights the weaknesses of civilian rule in the region (Karim, 2002). Sri Lanka is an example of a country that, despite being under civilian rule, underwent a process of militarization during its long-term conflict, but never granted military control over the state apparatus. Pakistan, therefore, is a typical example of a so-called praetorian state in which the military has consistently served as a protector, referee, and dictator in national politics (Shah, 2014).

These contrasting case studies reinforce the point that Pakistan's continued military hegemony was not predetermined but instead prompted by certain institutional, geopolitical, and leadership conditions that were fortuitous. A brief account of some of these factors is presented below.

### **Colonial Legacy and Military Dominance in Pakistan**

Pakistan is characterized by praetorianism, whose origins can be traced back to its colonial past. The British Raj had bequeathed a centralized bureaucracy controlled by the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Army; both were intended to maintain law and order and imperial security, rather than facilitating democratic involvement. When Pakistan gained its independence in 1947, it inherited these centralized institutions and lacked strong, mass-based political organizations that could check them. Thus, the new state inherited a civil-military bureaucracy that was disproportionately strong and regarded as the source of the state's stability in the absence of mass-based political parties (Jalal, 1995). Combined with factionalism within the Muslim League, this weakened parliamentary legitimacy with the early assassination of the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951.

In 1958, General Ayub Khan had institutionalized military supremacy through the first coup sanctioned through the judiciary under the 'doctrine of necessity' (Newberg, 1995). These processes created an institutional imbalance, where unelected institutions repeatedly ousted elected ones. By 1977, when General Zia-ul-Haq declared martial law, the military had established a strong self-identity of being an institution of security but also the judge of the ideological and political order in Pakistan (Haqqani, 2005). According to Cohen (2004), Pakistan later became a garrison state, where security and order imperatives always triumphed over democratic development.

### **The Strategic Environment and State Mentality of Security in Pakistan**

Since its early days, Pakistan faced acute security challenges- the territorial problems with India, the Kashmir conflict, and the trauma of Partition. Such insecurities created what Cohen (2004) describes as the state of mind of a garrison state, in which military readiness and survival take precedence over participatory politics. The 1948, 1965, and 1971 wars established the army as the protector of the national identity, and Cold War relationships with the United States provided financial and military aid, which now bypassed the control of civilian authorities (Haqqani, 2005). By 1988, this paradigm of security order had entrenched the military within the governance context, disempowering and subordinating civilian authority.

### **Early Political Crises and Military Ascendancy**

Pakistan was left without its most reasonable civilian leader when Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in 1951. Later regimes were characterised by factionalism within the Muslim League, a poor parliamentary culture, and concerns related to provincial autonomy (Burki, 1991). Civilian legitimacy was further undermined by the impossibility of writing a consensual constitution until 1956. The civil bureaucracy, headed by Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad and subsequently by Iskander Mirza, became increasingly dependent on the military to resolve crises. In 1958, General Ayub Khan overthrew the government through a coup d'état that ushered in military rule in the country, as the constitution was repealed. This marked the establishment of the military's dominance over the court by advocating the necessity doctrine (Newberg, 1995), thereby laying down a legal blueprint for authoritarian interventions.

### **Military-guardian and Wars**

The wars waged in 1965 and 1971 further boosted the military legitimacy of Pakistan. The military conflict with India that occurred in 1965 elevated the armed forces to the role of protectors of national honor, but its uncertain outcome undermined the civilian regime of Ayub Khan. It was a watershed, however, with the 1971 civil war and the secession of East Pakistan. The defeat in the war undermined General Yahya Khan, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto rose to power. A new civilian constitution was established in 1973. However, the shock of disintegration reinforced the military's self-perception as the supreme guarantor of Pakistan's territorial and ideological unity (Shah, 2014). This dual legacy—military failure but institutional resilience—set the stage for continued military involvement in politics even under nominal civilian rule.

### **The Judiciary and the Doctrine of Necessity**

The role of the judiciary is another aspect of the authoritarian course in Pakistan that has been overlooked. The 1954 validation of the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly by Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad, in *Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan v. The Federation of Pakistan* led the judiciary to embed a culture of law that favored executive and military powers over parliamentary sovereignty (Newberg, 1995). Authoritarianism had become normalized through the application of the doctrine of necessity as a legal means to legitimize it and undermine the principles of democratic leadership by the time of Zia under martial law. This formed a cyclical

effort whereby military interventions were sanctioned in courts, furthering the legitimacy of civilian rule.

### **International Patronage and Military Empowerment**

External alliances also influenced civil-military relations prior to 1988. In the Cold War, Pakistan's military allied with the United States. It enjoyed military assistance under SEATO, CENTO, and later through direct assistance in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s (Haqqani, 2005). These alliances subjected the military to resources that were not subject to civilian control, which made them institutional and economic (Siddiq, 2017). In contrast, civilian governments relied on unstable coalitions and fragile revenue bases. The outcome was the asymmetric empowerment of the military, not only in domestic politics but also in global geopolitics.

### **Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the Limits of Civilian Supremacy**

The civilian government of Bhutto (1971-1977) represented a radical move to reestablish the supremacy of parliament. A federal, parliamentary structure was established by his 1973 Constitution to limit military prerogatives. Nonetheless, Bhutto gradually relied on undemocratic means, such as the suppression of dissent, the press, and the politics of patronage, which weakened democratic consolidation (Waseem, 2022). Dissatisfaction over electoral fraud in 1977 and the polarization of the political scene facilitated the rise to power of General Zia-ul-Haq through a coup. The regime of Zia turned the very fabric of political life in Pakistan, introducing the ideology of Islam to the state institutions and institutionalizing military superiority even further.

### **Zia-ul-Haq's Martial Law, Islamization and Constitutional Engineering**

The civil-military relations of Pakistan had a long-lasting heritage as a result of the rule of General Zia (1977-1988). He had, through the Islamization process, developed legitimacy within the conservative religious sections, and the military was brought into alignment with the ideological identity of Pakistan (Haqqani, 2005). More importantly, Zia also brought changes in the constitution with the Eighth Amendment (1985), which gave the president the ability to dissolve elected assemblies under Article 58(2)(b). This clause institutionalized an inherent imbalance of power whereby civilian governments could be unceremoniously dismissed, and in most cases with military support. At the same time, the military consolidation of political and economic power occurred with the help of the United States' ties to the nation of Afghanistan during the 1980s jihad, as massive streams of foreign aid bypassed civil institutions and empowered the army and intelligence (Rizvi, 2000).

General Zia ul Haq left one of the most prominent legacies to the Pakistani state and its people in the form of his Islamization project to Islamize the state and its people. Zia transformed the legitimacy of the military not only as a protector of territorial sovereignty but also as a protector of Islamic ideology by introducing Sharia-based laws, the Hudood Ordinances, and the Federal Shariat Courts (Haqqani, 2005). This ideological shift allowed the military to adopt a self-image of guardian of the Islamic identity of Pakistan, thus leaving aside other political discourses promoted by non-military actors. Furthermore, Zia contrived a political structure that supported non-party elections in 1985 and made alliances with conservative religious parties, thereby further splitting the mainstream parties, including the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). As a result, the process of Islamization produced two different outcomes: first, it augmented the pool of ideological support of military strength, and second, it drained the institutional integrity of secular politics, effectively limiting democratic leaders in the post-1988 period to the religious-political interactions that they themselves could do nothing about (Shafiq, 1998).

By 1988, when Zia died, the political system of Pakistan was strongly biased towards institutions that had not been elected. Repression had divided and diluted civilian parties, the judiciary had

frequently authorized military action, and the military-bureaucratic nexus dominated both the economy and the government. Although the 1988 elections officially reinstated civilian rule, the historical institutions of centralized power, the recurrence of coups, and constitutional manipulations, as well as Cold War geopolitics, dictated that the playing field was structurally unsuitable for democratic consolidation. The 1988-1999 period, therefore, did not usher in an era of a break with authoritarianism, but rather a renewed, hybrid version of praetorianism. Therefore, the political structure of Pakistan was, by 1988, structurally prejudiced against the dominance of civilians. The weakening of political parties, a compromised judicial system, constitutional engineering by Zia, and Cold War patronage had formed a praetorian state, where the military was the protector, judge, and player in the political arena. The democratic process of reinstatement in 1988 thus did not occur in a vacuum, but within a structure designed to limit civilian governments. The decade that ensued should therefore be seen not as a natural loss of democracy, but as the natural consequence of deep-seated structural imbalances and institutional remnants that date back to 1947.

### **Pakistan as a Hybrid State.**

Since 1988, Pakistan has been a classic example of what researchers refer to as hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarian governments, where institutions of democracy are present, but are recurrently overridden by informal veto actors (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2002). The president and military still dominated the structure even though regular elections were conducted. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project assigned Pakistan in the 1990s to neither the category of consolidated democracy nor a closed autocracy, but to the grey zone of authoritarian resilience (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This framing emphasizes the need to interpret the decade as a failed democracy, rather than as an experiment in hybrid government. The most apparent institutional and structural imbalances that we can see today were crystalized during this decade: the legitimization of executive dismissal by the judiciary, military involvement in strategic policymaking, and patronage politics by the elite. According to Waseem (2022), the political skirmishes of the 1990s were a precursor to the subsequent issues that civilian leaders and the military faced during the period from 2008 to 2018. In this way, the analysis of this decade offers a necessary analytic space between the dictatorial history of Pakistan and its ongoing crises of democratic weakness.

Research into the decade of democracy in Pakistan is not merely a matter of historical concern but also has modern significance. Many of the institutions' legacies that today can be observed, including judicial-executive disputes, military control over the security policy, and the patronage-based functioning of the political parties, were concentrated in the 1990s (Waseem, 2022). Such unresolved tensions formed a basis of the future crises within the following decades, such as the transition in 2007-2008 and the 2018-2022 civil-military confrontations.

### **Conclusion**

With the death of General Zia in 1988, there opened what seemed to be a democratic window, and Benazir Bhutto was elected as the first woman prime minister of a Muslim-majority country. This marked the beginning of the most extended democratic interlude in Pakistan's history since independence. Nevertheless, the decade began and ended with political instabilities, frequent toppling of governments through Article 58(2) (b), and the military's tense relations with the civilian governments. Major incidents, such as the ousting of Bhutto in 1990 and 1996, the dual resignation crisis of 1993, the nuclear tests of 1998, and the Kargil War of 1999, demonstrated that although formal democracy was in place, the military remained the veto player. Therefore, Pakistan from 1988 to 1999 is a perfect example of such a hybrid regime, as authoritarian limitations accompanied rival elections.

The 1988-1999 decade was the most extended period of experimentation with electoral democracy in Pakistan since 1947, but it was a hybrid regime. These regimes hold frequent elections, yet they operate within structural limits that favour the authoritarian players, as explained by Levitsky and Way. In Pakistan, the presidential authority assigned in the 58(2)(b) of the Constitution, the historical legitimization of coups by the judiciary, and the military domination of the defense and foreign policy limited the sphere of civilian governments to strict parameters. To this end, the democratic decade was not so much a break with authoritarianism as a reformulation of the civil-military bargaining.

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