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Parliamentary Committees and Opposition Effectiveness in Pakistan: The Pakistan People's Party in the National Assembly, 1990–2018

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Abstract

Parliamentary opposition plays a crucial role in democratic accountability, but its impact is shaped by its political and electoral power as well as the institutional environment of parliament. Parliamentary committees are especially significant because they provide the legislature with an opportunity to review and examine bills, inspect government departments, assess public expenditure, seek information, and hold executive officials to account. The present study focuses on the efficacy of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as a committee-based opposition in Pakistan's National Assembly in three phases: 1990-1993, 1997-1999, and 2013-2018. The study relies on the rules of the National Assembly, reports, and records of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), parliamentary proceedings, and literature. The study adopts a qualitative longitudinal comparative design. Committee opposition effectiveness is measured by three dimensions — institutional access, oversight activity, and institutional influence — that are mutually linked. The analysis shows that even rigorous political opposition did not necessarily lead to effective committee oversight in the 1990s. Committee institutions were still developing from 1990 to 1993, while in the era of 1997 to 1999, the PPP's numerical weakness and a strongly governing majority of members reduced the committee's institutional power. By 2013–2018, the PPP's capacity to conduct legislative and financial oversight was significantly enhanced by stronger institutionalization of the committees, expanded parliamentary oversight, as well as the opposition leadership of the PAC. However, the recommendations of these committees were still tied to majoritarian politics and implementation issues. The study contends that opposition effectiveness in developing parliamentary democracies like Pakistan

is best understood as an interaction between party strategy and institutional opportunity rather than as a function of confrontation, cooperation, or parliamentary numbers alone.

Keywords: *Pakistan People's Party; parliamentary opposition; parliamentary committees; Public Accounts Committee; National Assembly of Pakistan; legislative oversight; executive accountability*

1. Introduction

Opposition is a fundamental trait of a parliamentary democracy. Elections produce not just governments but also institutionalized alternatives to governments, and these opposition actors are expected to investigate executive conduct, challenge public policy, uncover government failings, voice alternative preferences, and politically hold governments and institutions accountable (Khan et al. 2021, 65–67).

But much of the scholarship on opposition has traditionally measured its impact in terms of elections, parliamentary votes, legislative achievement, government formation, no-confidence motions, or confrontation with incumbents. These methods and the output work, although, reflect some important features of opposition politics but tend to underestimate the institutional work done in parliamentary committees. Over the past few decades, comparative legislative scholarship has shown that the formal design of legislatures shapes the opportunities that opposition actors have for involvement in the legislature in policymaking and oversight processes (Wegmann 2022, 1–5).

Committees play an important role, particularly in providing for detailed parliamentary work which cannot normally be carried out on the floor of the House. They specialize in policy and undertake functions such as deliberation, legislative review, information-gathering, and oversight (International Crisis Group 2008, 5-20). But it cannot be assumed that they are significant just because they exist. The issue is not whether committees have such powers, but whether opposition members can avail themselves of those powers and how those powers are distributed, and whether they have institutional consequences (Gaines et al. 2019, 331-34). Studies of parliamentary democracies also indicate that opposition parties have greater opportunities to challenge and criticize the government's legislative agenda when they are chairing committees, if they are indeed the ones doing so, as the chair of a committee may not be enough to ensure influence (Fortunato, Martin, and Vanberg 2019, 785–87; Sieberer and Höhmann 2017, 301–5).

In this context, Pakistan is an important institutional setting for examining this association. It has seen democratic interludes and authoritarian breaks, and elected governments are often saddled amid high levels of polarization, executive domination, weak institutional conventions, and differential progress in legislatures. Opposition in Parliament has therefore frequently taken the forms of floor debate, protest, public mobilization, alliance-building, and extra-parliamentary pressure. One of the main political parties of Pakistan, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), is a useful longitudinal case study, having been the opposition party under quite different institutional and political circumstances (**Faiz 2022**).

This study focuses on the PPP's opposition role during 1990–1993, 1997–1999, and 2013–2018. Previous work has shown that the PPP's overall political approach evolved across these periods. There was a stark difference in the political climate of the 1990s, with strong resistance between the government and the opposition, and the post-2008 period with much higher levels of tolerance for democratic continuity, negotiation, and accommodation. This shift from confrontation to reconciliation and pragmatic

parliamentary politics has been termed a movement by research specifically on the PPP (Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 396–403; Jamil, Ahmed, and Butt 2025, 480–84).

The present study evaluates whether the opposition's effectiveness in the PPP was a matter of changing party strategy or would have been the same in a different institutional environment. So the big question is: why did the capacity of the PPP to conduct committee-based parliamentary oversight vary across its opposition spells (1990–2018)? To answer this more specifically, the study seeks to answer the question: How did the opposition's access to parliamentary committees and the institutional structure of these committees change during the three periods? How did the PPP utilize committees, including standing committees and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), to perform its legislative, administrative, and financial scrutiny? How effective was the PPP as an opposition party, and how did disparities in institutional access, official oversight, and influence affect its effectiveness?

The article proposes that political strategy and institutional opportunity have interacted to create the 'PPP committee-based opposition effectiveness'. Political instability, confrontational politics, and relatively young committee structures restricted the institutionalization of opposition activity in the early 1990s. The committee system had progressed further during 1997–1999, while the numerical strength of the PPP was minuscule and opposition was largely limited by the overwhelming parliamentary domination of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). But by 2013–2018 it was quite a different scenario: parliamentary committees were functioning in a more mature and regularized manner, opposition was more regularized, and the convention of keeping the PAC under the opposition meant that the PPP had an institutional space that it had not had in any of its previous periods of opposition. It led to a significant enhancement of oversight and accountability, not necessarily opposition control of the final product.

The article thus differentiates between political opposition and institutional opposition. A party can be very strong when it comes to challenging the government while possessing little capacity to exercise sustained institutional oversight. At the other end of the spectrum, an opposition party may fail to defeat a government bill but still hold the government accountable for it by investigating, questioning its financial aspects, introducing amendments, seeking information, referring committees to report on the bill, and requesting executive responses. The division is especially relevant in parliamentary systems, where governments often have legislative majorities and opposition influence is likely to be expressed through scrutiny and accountability rather than through opposition control over legislative outcomes (König, Lin, and Silva 2023, 594–96).

The next section underscores and develops a conceptual framework of the study. The third section describes the research methodology and study design. The fourth section, being the central analytical part, evaluates the PPP and Committee-Based Opposition across Three Parliamentary Periods. Section five presents the Comparative Discussion and explains the transformation in committee-based opposition effectiveness. The last section concludes the paper.

2. Parliamentary Opposition, Committee Institutions, and the Evolution of Oversight in Pakistan

2.1 Parliamentary Opposition and Legislative Oversight

A viable parliamentary opposition serves much more than an electoral role. It is an institutional arrangement that challenges executive powers in the period between elections. They can disagree with

or challenge government legislation, examine government ministries, reveal government shortcomings, request information, offer alternatives, and seek to impose political or administrative costs on governing parties. These functions can, however, vary significantly from one parliamentary system to another, due to the uneven distribution of formal institutional rights. (Hix and Noury 2016, 249–51)

The comparative study of over fifty legislative chambers carried out by Wegmann reveals a significant degree of cross-national diversity in the formal powers granted to opposition actors in policymaking. The institutional approach is especially relevant because it transcends the assumption that opposition influence could be gleaned from seat share alone. Access to the agenda, deliberation, amendment, committees, and procedural instruments is determined by legislative rules; in other words, the same opposition can have very different capacities in different institutional designs (Wegmann 2022, 1-5). Institutional mechanisms are also essential for ensuring parliamentary oversight, allowing opposition parties to gain access to places where the executive is dominant. In Norway, opposition parties have been able to leverage new oversight mechanisms to place limits on incumbents and gain access to administrative policymaking processes that would otherwise have been challenging to access (Maor 1998, 103-6). This argument is relevant for more than just the European democracies. It argues that the opposition's effectiveness needs to be evaluated in terms of the institutional tools at a specific historical moment. This is particularly crucial as governments commonly have significant structural factors at play in parliamentary systems. In that case, opposition effectiveness cannot be measured solely by legislative defeats because legislatures are more likely to pass bills when the majority of assembly members come from different political parties. König, Lin and Silva therefore count failures in government bills as politically meaningful rather than merely a failure. The authors have examined the effects of opposition support and committee chairmanship on the number of government bills that were challenged for amendments by opposition in the government's analysis of some 7,400 government bills (König, Lin, and Silva 2023, 594–96).

Opposition oversight should thus be thought of not as a means to immediate policy success, but as a way to watch for and help prevent failure. An opposition party can shape accountability through exposing policy failures, compelling ministers to defend policy decisions, uncovering administrative irregularities, introducing alternative policies in the parliamentary records, or raising the political and public price of government decisions. These functions are important even if, in the end, the numerical majority prevails.

2.2 Parliamentary Committees as Arenas of Opposition Influence

Parliamentary committees are an important place for such activities. They may be more appropriate for detailed scrutiny than plenary debates because of their smaller membership, specialization of their policies and documents, and access to officials (Tasleem and Zaidi 2013). Gaines and his colleagues list policy formulation, deliberation, and oversight as among their central functions delegated to legislative committees, but note that while researchers can assume they have an impact, they must actually prove it (Gaines et al. 2019, 331-34).

The leadership of the committees is especially significant. Fortunato, Martin, and Vanberg examine the legislative journeys of some 1,100 bills by the governments of three parliamentary democracies and conclude that opposition control of committee chairs significantly boosts legislative review. The

Committee chairs might have information and knowledge about the procedures and the agenda that enables the opposition parties to scrutinize government proposals more thoroughly than they otherwise could (Fortunato, Martin, and Vanberg 2019, 785–87).

However, it is not always true that the chairman is equated with power. The two authors' comparative study of the authority of committee chairs in the fifteen Western European democracies reveals that the powers of committee chairs vary widely and that they may be less extensive than theory suggests (Sieberer & Höhmann, 2017, 301-5). This qualification is much needed in the Pakistani situation. The chairmanship of an oversight committee will not necessarily remedy the actions of majorities of governing bodies, ineffective enforcement, or lack of compliance by the bureaucracy. Scrutiny and policy control are further emphasized by Behrens, Nyhuis and Gschwend. They distinguish constructive legislative review from opposition legislative scrutiny for examining, contesting, or challenging government proposals. Opposition amendments do not necessarily have to lead to the drafting of an amendment as a successful outcome to serve a democratic purpose; they can be used to show disagreement, record deficiencies, and politically challenge government policy (Behrens, Nyhuis, and Gschwend 2023, 223–26).

Committee-based opposition effectiveness therefore should not be reduced to whether recommendations become law. Committees can be useful in obtaining information, making it public, keeping a record, forcing explanations, providing reports, or improving the likelihood of corrective action in the future. This larger picture is especially relevant to the context of parliamentary opposition in Pakistan, where governing parties have maintained sufficient majority at the parliamentary level to preclude any real opposition parties from having a direct influence on the outcomes of legislative proceedings.

2.3 Conceptualizing Committee-Based Opposition Effectiveness

Conceptualizing on this literature, this study introduces a multi-faceted concept of committee opposition effectiveness in three interconnected dimensions: institutional access, oversight activity, and institutional influence. Institutional access is now defined as the formal and actual possibilities of opposition parties in the committee system. These include committee membership, representation, access to committee proceedings, chairmanships, the leadership of parliamentary advisory committees, and the right to examine ministries or documents, the right to summon officials or request information, and the extent of continuity of parliamentary institutions. Access to institutions is thus the context of opposition activity.

Oversight activity is the use of these institutional opportunities. It involves participation in committee hearings, committee deliberation on proposed government bills, examination of government performance, review of government expenditure, questioning of government officials, discussion of audit objections, amendment of bills, and making recommendations. High institutional access, if it were not accompanied by the use and active involvement and utilization, would not itself constitute effective opposition.

The institutional influences concern the consequences of scrutiny. These can range from government action, adoption or partial adoption of recommendations, amendments to legislation, exposure of irregularities, referral for administrative action, recovery of public money, better disclosures or

institution of public accountability procedures. Influence can range from actual policy changes to subtler variations, such as executive responsiveness, that are politically important.

The relationship thus can be summarized as:

Institutional Access → Oversight Activity → Institutional Influence

This sequence is not a deterministic order. It is shaped by parliamentary arithmetic, the size of the government majority, party discipline, political polarization, the responsiveness of the executive, institutional continuity, and the ability to implement committee recommendations. A weak final policy impact is not necessarily a weak oversight. Opposition effectiveness can be significant at the scrutiny stage despite a low state of policy control.

2.4 Development of Parliamentary Committees and Opposition Access in Pakistan

The committee system in Pakistan has evolved gradually over time. Parliamentary committees existed prior to the 1990s, but the National Assembly procedural framework consolidated gradually. In August 1992, the National Assembly adopted its Rules of Procedure, which were then revised in 2007 and modified several times. The shift in the regulatory landscape of the PPP during 1990-1993 and the present situation of parliamentary work (2013-2018) show that the regulatory environment has changed (National Assembly of Pakistan 2024, i).

In the modern interpretation, standing committees are akin to government ministries and may discuss and consider legislation and issues referred to them. The committee system thus offers avenues for specialized scrutiny by the legislature in addition to plenary sessions. The position of PAC is very significant; its mandate encompasses the examination of appropriations, annual financial accounts, Auditor-General reports and other financial matters referred to it (National Assembly of Pakistan 2018, rules 198, 202–203).

Similarly, Pakistan-specific scholarship emphasizes the surveillance capabilities of committees. Parliamentary committees can also be made more transparent and accountable, and they can reveal constraints that hinder their effectiveness in Pakistan (Akram, Azhar, and Haleemi 2021, 133–35). The timing of the PAC is an especially helpful institutional indicator. The Ninth PAC was established on 16 May 1991 with Mr. Hamza as chairperson, while the Eleventh PAC was formed on 12 May 1997 and again chaired by Mr. Hamza. In contrast, the Fourteenth PAC was formed on August 21, 2013, and PPP Leader of the Opposition Syed Khurshheed Ahmed Shah was elected its chairman in December 2013 (Paasch 2018, 15-25). The trend of assigning the chairperson of the PAC to the opposition party was also tied to the post-2008 parliamentary term, as opposed to the PPP's earlier opposition experience (National Assembly of Pakistan 2024, "All PACs").

The argument developed in this article is based on the historical developments of these institutional arrangements. It was not only the political behavior of the PPP as a political party that changed between the period of the 1990s and 2013-2018; the legislature to which it was elected also changed. The later period provided greater structured committee procedures, and most significantly, direct opposition leadership of the principal parliamentary financial oversight body.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative longitudinal comparative case-study design to assess the opposition role of the PPP in the National Assembly for the periods 1990–1993, 1997–1999 and 2013–2018. The three

periods have been chosen because the PPP occupied opposition benches under markedly different parliamentary and political conditions, providing a historically structured comparison within a political party.

Rather than the PPP's general political actions, the unit of analysis is institutional mechanisms and opportunities that the PPP faces in parliamentary oversight during the opposition period. The study thereby separates committee opposition from broader forms of opposition, such as street mobilization, electoral alliances, public protest, long marches, and party competition outside the legislature. These broader political activities are included where they are relevant to the institutions in which parliamentary oversight took place.

Mainly documentary data has been used in this study. The primary sources are National Assembly rules, parliamentary performance reports, institutional records of the Public Accounts Committee, committee statistics, official PAC reports, implementation records, and parliamentary debates (when available). Secondary material refers to peer-reviewed international scholarly studies that address parliamentary opposition and legislative committees, and research in Pakistan-based academic publications. The analysis is also informed by the author's earlier investigation of the PPP's overall shift from confrontational to reconciliatory opposition; in the current article, the analysis focuses on institutional capacity, not reproduced here.

The three dimensions that are derived from the literature are institutional access, oversight activity, and institutional influence. The same analytical categories are applied in each of the three historical periods to avoid relying exclusively on the narrative chronological order. Institutional access refers to committee structures, leadership, and procedural opportunities. Oversight activity looks at the scrutiny and involvement that actually takes place. Institutional influence includes the influence of parliament on government responses, reports, recommendations, policy changes, and accountability.

A methodological warning is required on PAC material. The fiscal year in which the audit report is issued is typically used to name an audit report, not the fiscal year that the PAC considered the report. The PAC had accumulated huge amounts of old files as subsequent committees dealt with cases from many years ago. This means that a report for the audit period of 1998–99 is not necessarily considered as evidence that the respective scrutiny was conducted by the National Assembly of 1997–1999. The analysis notes the year under audit rather than the year the committee is scrutinized, when possible, based on the official record. This is the case with the Fourteenth PAC, which was handed an eight-year backlog and considered reports of the previous parliamentary terms (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39–41).

4. PPP and Committee-Based Opposition across Three Parliamentary Periods

4.1 PPP Opposition, 1990–1993: Political Activism and Weak Institutionalization

Following the general election of 1990, the PPP returned to the opposition benches under an Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI)/PML-N government headed by Nawaz Sharif. The political climate was very one-sided and confrontational (Lashari and Mirza 2013, 79–98). The transition to democracy after General Zia ul-Haq's death had not yet seen the development of stable conventions of government and opposition parties, and relations between the country's leading political parties remained intensely personal and conflictual. Studies of the broader period reveal that opposition-government dynamics – defined as conflictual – are a key obstacle to democratic consolidation (Rehman, Khan, and Khan 2017, 24–27).

The PPP continued to be a palpable opposition within Parliament, however. It questioned the key elements of the government's legislative and constitutional program and offered criticisms of the economy. In fact, the party was not passive nor institutionally absent as it faced opposition from those challenging the implementation of Shariah legislation, the Twelfth Constitutional Amendment to special courts, measures for privatization, and the government's fiscal policies. As this study has established, PPP parliamentarians have frequently criticized the government's actions in the National Assembly and raised questions about judicial independence, provincial rights, public finance, and political responsibility (Ali et al. 2025, 195–98).

But the difference in this regard as relevant to the study is between parliamentary opposition and institutionalized committee oversight. In the following decades, there was less institutionalization of procedures found in the modern committee system. This is indeed correct, as the National Assembly adopted its own Rules of Procedure only in the middle of the period under examination, on 5th August 1992 (National Assembly of Pakistan 2024, i). The PAC definitely was there. The official records of the National Assembly indicate that the Ninth PAC was formed on 16 May 1991. However, the committee was not originally established as a formal committee under the subsequent convention that the Leader of the Opposition chairs the main financial oversight committee. It was not, therefore, the position of the chairmanship that gave the opposition (the PPP) its institutional strength two decades later (National Assembly of Pakistan 2024, “All PACs”).

This distinction alters the understanding of the effectiveness of the PPP in the early nineties. There was significant opposition within the party, but a relatively less developed institutional capacity for systematic scrutiny by committees. The opposition in Parliament was mainly expressed in the floor debates and political competition, backed by mobilization outside Parliament. Such activism might cost the government politically, raise political issues in public, and undermine the government's legitimacy and its policies, but not necessarily create permanent committee oversight.

Thus, the case of 1990–1993 demonstrates one of the key arguments of the article: high political opposition does not always lead to high institutional effectiveness of opposition. The PPP had the visibility and voice to influence the political process, but it did not have the institutional system of committee rules and traditions that was being developed. With respect to the analytical framework, there was some oversight activity, but access to specialized opposition-led oversight remained limited, resulting in limited institutional influence. This is a more accurate description of PPP opposition than the blanket term of “ineffective” for the time being. It was a very important party, and some of its objections became part of the political debate. The capacity to transform opposition into stable, specialist, committee-based executive scrutiny was less developed.

4.2 PPP Opposition, 1997–1999: Parliamentary Voice under Majoritarian Constraint

The second period was quite different from the first. The PML-N won a majority in the National Assembly after the 1997 general elections, whereas the PPP had only 18 of the 207 seats of the National Assembly of Pakistan. The numerical imbalance had a profound effect on the opposition's bargaining situation. There was a visible political identity for the PPP and a parliamentary identity, but its ability to hold the government to account through voting was significantly diminished (Rehman et al. 2017, 24–27)

In this period, however, parliamentary procedures clearly show that numerical inadequacy did not lead to a state of complete passivity. It opposed any legislation it deemed authoritarian and politically biased, such as the Ehtesab framework, anti-terrorism laws, and the proposed Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment. Meanwhile, the party worked in harmony with the government on vital constitutional issues (Hassnain 2025, 2202–2204). Most importantly, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished Article 58(2)(b) that would have allowed the President to dissolve the National Assembly, and the Fourteenth Amendment dealt with occurrences of parliamentary defections. The role of the PPP was therefore not always that of an obstructionist, nor always that of an active participant (Khalid and Sajid 2021, 218–22). This more complex picture is reflected in Pakistan research on the behavior of the PPP in parliament. Research on later constitutional politics also indicates that PPP opposition has frequently brought together strong reservations and selective cooperation on the ground that party leaders saw the constitutional or national institutional goals as important enough (Gohar, Sumayya, and Sarwat 2022, 59–65). Majoritarian constraint, however, is the key criterion for opposition that comes in the form of committees. Again, opposition chairmanship was not yet entrenched as a practice, and the Eleventh PAC was established on May 12, 1997. However, the institutional status of the PAC did not put the PPP in charge of financial oversight (National Assembly of Pakistan 2024, “All PACs”).

The 1997–1999 case consequently differs analytically from 1990–1993. By the late 1990s, the institutional immaturity of parliamentary rules and committee organization was less pronounced than at the beginning of the decade. Although opposition members might have been in the chamber for parliamentary enquiry or to suggest alternatives, the government had enough members to vote down unwanted amendments and pass bills. This is typical of the overall structural issue found in comparative parliamentary studies. A government with a majority in both the executive and the legislative branches is likely to be most powerful where executive and legislative majorities overlap, and opposition parties may be under severe pressure to achieve direct policy results regardless of how strong their scrutiny (König, Lin, and Silva 2023, 594–96).

It is therefore necessary to describe the role of the PPP in the Parliament during the period 1997–1999 as being institutionally present but with weak leverage. Its members were allowed to criticize laws, spar with the Constitution, and occasionally work together on proposed changes; they didn't have enough numbers or institutions to translate scrutiny into a long-term influence on the government's policies. The institution of committees in the context of a gradual transition to democracy was also undermined by the eventual military intervention in October 1999. The comparison with the earlier period of 1990–1993 is therefore enlightening. The first period had a main constraint in institutional immaturity and confrontational politics; the second had a main constraint in the lack of numerical strength of the PPP and the supermajority of the government. Both periods created similar restrictions in different ways.

4.3 PPP Opposition, 2013–2018: Expanded Committee Access and Institutionalized Oversight

The institutional context for the Fourteenth National Assembly was very different than that of the 1990s. From 2008 to 2013, Pakistan had an uninterrupted elected parliamentary government, and now it witnessed the first transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another. The growing acceptance by the PPP and PML-N of the idea that political competition does not necessarily entail the

premature ousting of elected governments was influenced by the Charter of Democracy and the experience of past democratic failures (Jamil, Ahmed, and Butt 2025, 480–84).

The main focus of the scholarship on the period remained on reconciliation, consensus-building, and the further development of an institutionalized parliamentary culture following 2008. The PPP was the main opposition party in the 2013 National Assembly, and Syed Khursheed Ahmed Shah was appointed as the Leader of the Opposition. Research on the Fourteenth Assembly also notes that it was characterized by collaboration between the government and opposition, despite occasional political conflicts over key policy and constitutional issues (Bashir, Khan, and Ashraf 2024, 839–42).

The most distinguishing feature of this study is the magnitude and institutionalization of committee activity. The National Assembly's official report for the fourth parliamentary year reports that thirty-one ministerial Standing Committee meetings took place this year, two hundred and eighty committee meetings of Standing Committees met, twenty-four sub-committee meetings were held, eighty-six bills were referred to committees, committees reported 280 bills, and twenty-eight documents were laid before the House by Ministerial Standing Committees. In the same parliamentary year, PAC convened 78 meetings, and its sub-committees 45 meetings (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, xvi–xvii).

These figures are not to be taken as indicating the activity of the PPP; many of the standing committees had membership from both sides of government, and committee activity was an overall institutional one. Their importance is intended to signal the much more advanced institutional opportunity structure of the PPP. The committee reporting was more detailed and comprehensive, scrutiny was more routine, and the institutional separation between special oversight and plenary politics had increased, when compared with the early 1990s (Iqbal and Begum 2025, 180–182). National Assembly rules gave standing committees the power to review bills and issues before them and to offer recommendations. The provisions of rules regarding PAC also contained a formal provision for examining the annual financial accounts and reports of the Auditor-General (National Assembly of Pakistan 2018, rules 198, 202–203). The PPP's opposition activity also demonstrated a level of institutional engagement. The party remained skeptical of government economic policy, taxes, privatization, and parts of financial legislation. On their part, Adil and Afridi, in their study of financial law from 2013–2018, argue that the opposition was not only “friendly,” as reflected in budget debates, budget proposals, and budget amendments (Adil and Afridi 2021, 174–78). In the same way, the PPP provided a mix of cooperation and criticism in constitutional law. It had certain reservations regarding the constitutional amendments but participated in constitutional bargaining; thus, the party was able to influence the debates even without control of the government (Gohar, Sumayya, and Sarwat 2022, 59–65).

What did change was not the absence of conflict, but rather its different character from that of the 1990s. It was the depth of the conflict that could be dealt with through regular parliamentary channels. There was a certain degree of criticism of government legislation within the PPP framework, but it was also capable of maintaining continuity of parliament; committees also provided more regular opportunities for oversight. This institutionalization made conflicts over the survival of the government no longer necessary.

Analytically, during the 2013–2018 period, there was an improvement in all three dimensions of the analytical framework introduced in the article. Increased institutional access with better committees and

opposition. Oversight activity rose through more regular committee meetings, financial and scrutiny reports, and parliamentary oversight. Institutional influence was still more limited than activity, as government majorities and non-binding recommendations continued to limit opposition control in the making of final decisions. Even so, the impact of the institutions was much more pronounced than in the 1990s.

4.4 Public Accounts Committee: Opposition Leadership and Financial Accountability

The PAC offers the best empirical evidence of this shift, as it allows for direct comparison of the presence of committees and opposition control of an oversight institution. The PAC is specifically created to link parliamentary power to financial responsibility. Under the provisions of the National Assembly rules, it is responsible for examining appropriations, government finance accounts, reports by the Auditor-General, and other questions of expenditure. It thus provides a framework for organizational ability that enables Parliament to question the utilization of public funds in compliance with legislative mandate (National Assembly of Pakistan 2018, rules 202–203).

On August 21, 2013, the Fourteenth PAC was created. On 11th December 2013, a senior member of the PPP Parliamentary family, Syed Khursheed Ahmed Shah, was unanimously elected as chairman and a leader of the Opposition. This was very different from the opposition periods during the 1990s, when there was no institutional allocation of the PAC chairperson to the opposition (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39). The significance of this arrangement lies not merely in political symbolism. Although the exact limits of committee powers vary across legislatures, the comparison of committee leadership with opposition actors suggests that committee leadership can enhance the capacity of opposition actors to organize scrutiny, challenge government proposals, and extract information (Fortunato, Martin, and Vanberg 2019, 785–87; Sieberer and Höhmann 2017, 301–5).

There is significant documentation of PAC activity during the Fourteenth Assembly. The committee was formed in December 2013 and took over the previous eight years of audit reports. It has also formed four subcommittees as part of its work to catch up on backlogged cases, one of which is a Monitoring and Implementation Committee. In total, the PAC met 78 times during the fourth year of parliament and scrutinized 2,765 grants and audit paras in the relevant parliamentary year in the main committee and subcommittees of the PAC (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39–41).

This involved examining ministries, divisions, departments, financial obligations, complaints, public accountability issues, and other items. The committee also presented reports to the House, including reports for previous audit periods. This kind of evidence highlights the importance of considering data from the audit year with this in mind: The Fourteenth PAC had accounts to be processed from the prior year and more recent accounts to be looked at for the current year. However, the ability to arrange this type of review is itself proof of institutional oversight (Bashir, Khan, and Ashraf 2024, 842–844).

PAC activity also highlights differences between the effectiveness of oversight and control of the policy. Committees may ask questions, give instructions, investigate irregularities, determine accountability, and suggest remedial measures, but they cannot achieve accountability of the executive on their own. The annual report itself defines the PAC's recommendations as guidance to the executive after parliamentary approval, thereby clarifying the importance of these institutions and the limitations on implementation (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39–40).

As a result, the chairmanship of the PPP enhanced institutional access and oversight capacity but did not provide the PPP unilateral decision-making power over Government departments. This is significant as a measure of the effectiveness of opposition. If the success is in forcing executive compliance, the PAC would seem relatively weak. It makes it a much bigger deal if effectiveness is defined as systematic scrutiny, information acquisition, audit review, publicity, recommendations, monitoring, and the creation of an official accountability record (Binti Abu et al. 2024, 142–144)

The Fourteenth PAC is therefore the most compelling evidence for the central claim in this study. Political moderation and reconciliation alone do not account for the capacity building of the PPP in 2013-2018. Now the opposition had a huge institutional resource at its disposal, which it had not encountered in its previous parliamentary work.

5. Comparative Discussion: Explaining the Transformation in Committee-Based Opposition Effectiveness

Comparing the three opposition periods shows that the effectiveness of the PPP is not merely a matter of temporal shift from “bad” confrontation to “good” cooperation. Instead, the evidence suggests that the dynamics are more complex than simply interactions based on parliamentary numbers, strategy, and institutional development.

Table 1. The comparative matrix of the various dimensions

Dimension	1990–1993	1997–1999	2013–2018
PPP parliamentary position	Major opposition	Numerically opposition	weak Major opposition
Committee institutionalization	Emerging	More established but constrained	Significantly stronger
Opposition access to oversight	Limited	Limited	Expanded
Opposition leadership	PAC No	No	Yes
Plenary opposition activity	High	High	High
Committee-based scrutiny	Comparatively limited	Constrained by majority dominance	Substantially stronger
Institutional influence	Low	Low	Moderate
Principal constraint	Institutional immaturity and instability	Numerical marginality and government supermajority	Implementation and majoritarian limits
Dominant opposition mode	Political/confrontational	Parliamentary weakly leveraged	but Institutionalized scrutiny and selective cooperation

Table 1 indicates the three significant findings. Political opposition is not to be confused with institutional opposition. During the 1990s, the PPP was very active. It challenged major legislation, criticized

governments, mobilized politically against governments, and challenged budgets and constitutional proposals. But opposition was not always translated into institutionalized oversight. The case of 1990-1993 is significant because the PPP's political visibility was at its peak at the time the committee framework was rapidly gaining momentum. The message here is that there is a possibility of having tough opposition without good institutional discipline.

Second, opposition effectiveness is related to institutional opportunity and political strategy. The PPP's later conciliatory attitude was certainly a factor. Repeated democratic failures strengthened the sense of the need for parliamentary continuity and constitutional bargaining on both sides, among the PPP and PML-N. Political learning, however, cannot account for the difference between the 1990s and 2013-2018. An institutional resource that was not present in previous eras was the opposition leadership of the PAC, which had become more regularized in committee activity, and parliamentary rules had become more elaborate. The transition was thus not just behavioral, but also institutional (Chawla 2017, 243–245).

This discovery corroborates the comparative literature that focuses on the formalities that opposition actors can exercise. In fact, the impact of opposition policies and strategies varies across specific political organizations, the legislature, and not merely the type of regime or the size of the legislative chamber in which it is introduced (Wegmann 2022, 1-5). Fortunato, Martin, and Vanberg similarly show that opposition chairmanship can enhance legislative review (2019, 785–87). The Pakistani case illustrates the same general proposition for a single political system: opposition capacity evolved in response to alterations in institutional opportunities.

Third, institutionalization leads to greater scrutiny more easily than it gives the opposition more say in the level of scrutiny. The PPP was still unable to force its own amendments in parliament or committee decisions in the 2013–2018 period, in general. So, government dominance continued to play a significant role. However, assessing effectiveness solely through legislative gains would miss the bulk of the work accomplished by committees (Chawla and Ullah 2018, 7–9).

The Fourteenth Assembly exemplifies this difference in the structure of its organization. Committee institutions facilitated hundreds of meetings, referrals, reports, and financial-review proceedings. The PAC under Khursheed Shah studied thousands of grants and audit paras and devised subcommittee arrangements to clear the backlog of history and monitor the implementation (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39–41). These activities were signs of real accountability even where executive decisions were not subject to opposition (Ghumman 2013). This greater sense of effectiveness is reflected in current studies on legislative review. How opposition actors can contest the government in the legislature even if they do not routinely defeat government bills (König, Lin, and Silva 2023, 594–96). Opposition review can also serve functions distinct from government-party review, as it may be used to expose the government's flaws and bring its policy to the public arena for opposition (Behrens, Nyhuis, and Gschwend 2023, 223–26).

The comparison also sheds light on the meaning of numerical strength. The absence of strong parliamentary representation in the first two years of the PPP (1997-1999) severely diminished the PPP's bargaining power, but it was not just numbers. In 1990-1993 and 2013-2018, the party constituted a strong opposition party, but it was much more effective in 2013-2018 in terms of committee

effectiveness. Parliamentary size doesn't account for this difference. The context of institutions had transformed. The Pakistani case is thus part of a wider discussion on parliamentary opposition in developing democracies. Institutions are important not because they have diminished political conflict but because they redirect conflict into responsible processes. Committees, reporting structures, opposition leaders, and financial controls had been established, providing avenues to allow political differences to coexist with democratic continuity.

This is not to say that opposition in an institution always works. The independence of the committee, the responsiveness of the government, the expertise of the parliamentarians, the discipline of their parties, administrative compliance, and implementation should remain significant. Committee chairmanship should not be equated, however, with institutional power, as Sieberer and Höhmann (2017, 301-5) remind us. The Pakistani evidence also demonstrates that access and activity did not always lead to implementation. But institutional opportunity significantly broadened the set of tools at the opposition's disposal.

The central explanatory relationship can therefore be expressed as:

Opposition strategy × institutional opportunity → committee-based opposition effectiveness.

Each has its own limitations. A confrontational opposition may still be non-institutionalized even in the presence of parliamentary institutions; an opposition that is institutionalized but still weak may be subject to a majoritarian constraint, and an opposition with institutionalized power may be subject to a majoritarian constraint even if it is not non-institutionalized. Their interaction is what makes them effective.

6. Conclusion

The article has reviewed the PPP committee-based opposition role in the National Assembly during three phases: 1990-1993, 1997-1999, and 2013-2018. The study did not assess opposition effectiveness in terms of confrontation, cooperation, or legislative success but rather in terms of access to the institution, the amount of oversight, and institutional influence.

The comparison shows significant differences in the context of time. In the early years of the PPP's existence (1990-1993), it was much an active political opposition party, and its opposition was highly visible. But opposition took place in a parliamentary climate of institutionalization and committee procedures. The era thus showcases a period of robust political resistance, yet not robust institutional oversight.

The constraint is different for the 1997-1999 period. The PPP was still in parliament and showed signs of opposition and selective cooperation. But its limited representation and the overwhelming government's dominance significantly limited the power of the PPP. As a result, formal parliamentary involvement resulted in a weak institutional impact. It is also clear from the case that the existence of committees and parliamentary procedures is not enough if the opposition is weak in size and does not hold strategically important positions.

The biggest change was in 2013-2018. The Fourteenth National Assembly had more mature parliamentary procedures, with far greater committee activity, regularized scrutiny of legislation, and greater oversight. Most importantly, PPP Leader of the Opposition Syed Khursheed Ahmed Shah headed the Public Accounts Committee. The institutional importance of this arrangement was not limited to

symbolism but also encompassed the management of an extensive financial audit, addressing the backlog, examining thousands of audit paras and grants, and subcommittees to monitor and implement (National Assembly of Pakistan 2017, 39–41).

The article, therefore, suggests that the effectiveness of the PPP, which has increased over time, is not entirely due to its shift from confrontational to reconciliatory processes. Political learning and increased acceptance of democratic continuity were also important, but they took place in parallel with the institutionalization of Parliament. Opposition parties had more opportunities for oversight, and it was more systematic and frequent in 2013–2018 than during the PPP opposition period.

It is also necessary to distinguish between scrutiny capacity and policy control in the evidence. More powerful committees helped the PPP to question, investigate, expose, review expenses, and raise accountability issues in Parliament. They did not remove advantages enjoyed by the government or ensure that recommendations that were supported by the opposition were implemented. Committee institutionalization thus enhanced opposition effectiveness most obviously in relation to oversight, transparency, information production, and accountability, but not in control over government policy.

The implication is not only for the PPP but also for Pakistan. The effectiveness of opposition in developing parliamentary democracies is not just an outcome of electoral strength or political willingness to challenge incumbents. It further relies on whether there is meaningful parliamentary access to information, committees, leadership, financial oversight, and mechanisms of accountability on the executive. The institutionalization of these opportunities can turn political competition into a process of democratic debate or questioning. The experience of the PPP in the period 1990–2018 therefore shows that the importance of parliamentary opposition is not only a reflection of the will of opposition parties to do so, but also of the capacities of parliamentary institutions to do so.

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