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Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan (2018–2023): Analyzing Political Instability and Institutional Power Shifts

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Abstract

This research thesis critically examines the dynamics of civil-military relations in Pakistan between 2018 and 2023, a period marked by heightened political instability and significant institutional power shifts. The study investigates how the balance of power between civilian governments and the military establishment evolved during this time, particularly under the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government and in the wake of its subsequent removal. The research also explores how institutional interventions, judicial influence, and the role of security agencies impacted democratic governance and civilian supremacy. Using a qualitative approach grounded in political theory and empirical data, the thesis identifies recurring patterns of military dominance in policy-making, electoral engineering, and crisis management. It highlights key events such as the PTI-military alliance and its eventual fallout, opposition-led movements, and the increasing involvement of the judiciary and intelligence agencies in political affairs. These factors contributed to institutional fragmentation, public mistrust, and weakened democratic norms. The study concludes that despite formal democratic structures, Pakistan continues to experience an imbalance in civil-military relations, with the military wielding disproportionate influence. The thesis recommends structural reforms, constitutional safeguards, and greater civilian capacity-building to establish a sustainable democratic framework. This work contributes to the broader discourse on democratization, civil supremacy, and political stability in transitional states.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations, Political Instability, Institutional Power Shifts, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Military Influence, Civilian Supremacy, Democratic Governance, Judicial Activism, Security Establishment, Political Polarization, Constitutional Reform, Civil-Military Imbalance, Political Transitions, Hybrid Regime, Pakistan Politics



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Introduction

The relationship between civil and military authorities in Pakistan created its political conditions during independence, which led to changes in governance policies and national defense capabilities. The political relations between civilian and military institutions underwent a significant transformation in political stability, while public unrest increased with power equilibrium shifts from 2018 to 2023. Military-civilian relations significantly intensified during Prime Minister Imran Khan's administration, which eroded democratic institutions until his 2022 removal, resulting in intensified disputes about military involvement in political activities. Numerous hindrances persist against civilian supremacy in Pakistan because military institutions continue to exercise governance authority over national matters (Rizvi, 2022).

Through their influence, the military continues to control domestic and international policy formulation that determines national foreign objectives, along with television and court guidance. The country successfully handled intricate foreign affairs through relationship rebuilding with China while facing deteriorating ties with America and managing post-Afghanistan conflict disorder in the region during this era. The military began to exercise decision authority over these regions, thus strengthening its institutional power and pushing civilian administrators to the margins of essential decisions. A critical analysis of Pakistan's democratic future is needed because civilian institutions now face rising competition from military forces. The ongoing political instability inside Pakistan resulted in difficulties for civil-military relations because it caused continuous government transitions alongside judicial takeovers of power and election disputes. The intense lack of trust toward national institutions developed as a result of media controls alongside undisclosed military operations and public protests. Analyzing this context helps researchers make judgments about Pakistan's political course and related governance challenges and democratic system stability, together with civil rights protection (Javaid & Mushtaq, 2023).

An examination of Pakistan's shifting power dynamics together with civil-military relations unfolds from 2018 until 2023 serves as the research objective. The study examines strategic events while analyzing institutional relations and political conditions throughout the period because it aims to discover core elements that provoke instability and determine how balanced and stable governance can emerge.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing civil-military relations in Pakistan (2018–2023), **Coup Theory** offers a valuable lens to understand the dynamics of political instability and military influence. The theory suggests that military coups typically occur when political instability, factionalism within civilian leadership, or threats to the military's institutional interests prompt the armed forces to intervene in politics. In the case of Pakistan, the military's role has been pivotal in shaping governance, particularly during periods of political crisis such as Imran Khan's ouster in 2022. By applying **Coup Theory**, we can explore how internal divisions within civilian governments, economic crises, and foreign policy challenges—especially post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—created



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conditions where the military might assert its dominance. Additionally, the theory helps analyze the **civil-military bargain**, assessing how the military either directly or indirectly influenced political outcomes, while also considering factors that prevented outright military coups, such as the judiciary's role and public opinion. This framework thus provides a deeper understanding of how institutional power shifts occurred during this period, highlighting the military's strategies to maintain or expand its influence in national governance.

Literature Review

Multiple academic studies analyze Pakistan's civil-military relations as the military institution demonstrates repeated dominance against civilian institutions. Throughout history, the military has served as a dominant actor in national politics because it behaves through both direct takeovers and subtle political interferences. The persistent control of the military derives from three main factors: ineffective civilian institutions combined with weak judicial responses and positive public views that the military acts as a crisis stabilizer. Following 2018, the military sustained its influence to intervene in electoral matters as well as policy development and the transition of governments. The governance period between 2018 and 2023 brought severe political turmoil because the premiership of Imran Khan ended, followed by growing conflicts between civilians and the military. Military experts confirm that during this period, forces kept operating security programs and foreign policy initiatives from public view, yet civilian rulers struggled to maintain control. The public reacted with strong demonstrations and claims of military intervention when Khan was dismissed, while history shows that political turbulence provides the military with increased influence (Akhtar 2023).

At this time, geopolitics shaped how military relations functioned between civilians and soldiers. Military supremacy in Pakistani foreign policy intensified following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan because of Pakistan's tactical geographic position and strengthened China relations. The political leadership followed military decisions regarding foreign policy and national security because they feared their support might diminish or the military would destabilize the political environment. The military maintained its power through the implementation of media censorship alongside judicial activism. Studies confirm that political dissenters, alongside critical journalists, faced public suppression through harassment and censorship, resulting in military-aligned political discourse. Public discussion remained under control as civilian leadership lost strength, which allowed the military to establish continuous power dominance (Rehman, 2022; Khan, 2023).

Existing research shows civil-military relations in Pakistan transcend purely political structures because they incorporate historical traditions together with institutional traditions. Research findings indicate that recent political developments have led to new civilian supremacy discussions, yet academics still disagree about solving this problem by reforming military control and civil governance systems. The research path toward examining Pakistan's civil-military relations for sustainable democratic development depends on grasping current governing structures (Ahmed, 2022).



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Problem Statement

The framework aligns perfectly because it evaluates the precise balance of civil-military power in national institutions. During times of political instability and weak civilian leadership, Pakistan has struggled to execute objective civilian control as outlined by Huntington because military intervention becomes more probable. This framework aids in determining if recent shifts in power show civilian control has failed or if military dominance remains entrenched in Pakistan's political system.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the factors contributing to political instability in Pakistan between 2018 and 2023 and assess how these factors influenced the military's role in shaping political outcomes.
2. To examine the dynamics of the civil-military relations in Pakistan during this period, exploring how the military and civilian leadership navigated power shifts and the military's institutional interests in governance.

Research Questions

1. How did political instability and internal divisions within the civilian government between 2018 and 2023 influence the military's role in Pakistan's political decision-making?
2. To what extent did the civil-military relationship evolve during this period, and how did the military's institutional interests shape political outcomes in Pakistan?

Methodology

Data Collection

Quantitative methods applied in this research, in which the data will be gathered from primary sources, including interviews with political analysts, military officers, and journalists, along with official documents and media reports. Secondary sources will include scholarly books, research papers, and policy briefs to provide context on civil-military relations in Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The analysis will involve content analysis to identify key patterns in military influence, political instability, and the civil-military bargain. A comparative analysis will assess the conditions for military intervention, while case studies on key events, such as Imran Khan's ouster, will provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics.

Significance of the Study

Evaluation of this topic matters because it focuses on the ongoing conflict between civilian authority and military control, which maintains Pakistan's political instability. The study investigates civil-military historical and structural elements to deliver critical findings towards democratic institution stability



Background of the Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan (2018–2023)

Civil-military relations in Pakistan have remained a central feature of the country's political landscape since its inception in 1947. The military has repeatedly influenced, directed, or taken over political governance, often justifying its interventions on the grounds of national security, corruption, or inefficiency of civilian governments. From direct military rule to behind-the-scenes influence, the Pakistani military has shaped not only foreign and security policy but also domestic political trajectories. These dynamics have evolved, especially during the recent period from 2018 to 2023, which witnessed renewed debates over institutional balance and democratic stability (Rizvi, 2000; Shah, 2014).

The period from 2018 to 2023 was marked by a complex and often volatile relationship between civilian governments and the military establishment. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government, initially seen as having the military's backing, gradually entered a phase of friction with the establishment, particularly over foreign policy decisions, postings within the military, and institutional autonomy. These tensions culminated in significant political developments, including the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022 through a vote of no-confidence—widely speculated to have been influenced by military withdrawal of support. Such developments underscore how shifts in civil-military dynamics directly affect political stability in Pakistan (Yousaf, 2022; Fair, 2023).

The institutional power struggle during this period was not limited to the executive and the military; the judiciary and media also emerged as significant actors. The judiciary's role in politically charged cases, disqualification of elected leaders, and its perceived alignment with either civilian or military actors added layers of complexity to Pakistan's power configuration. Similarly, the media—facing censorship, intimidation, and manipulation—became both a tool and a battleground in this struggle for narrative control and institutional supremacy. These dynamics point to a broader issue: the absence of clear constitutional boundaries and the militarization of democratic processes (Siddiqi, 2019; Ahmed, 2021).

This thesis aims to critically examine the civil-military relations in Pakistan from 2018 to 2023, focusing on how these relations influenced political instability and shifted institutional power dynamics. By analyzing key political events, policy shifts, and institutional interactions, this study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of Pakistan's hybrid political system, where democratic processes coexist with enduring military influence. Through this lens, the thesis explores the implications for democratic consolidation and suggests pathways for strengthening civilian supremacy and institutional accountability in Pakistan's governance framework (Nawaz, 2008; Haqqani, 2018).

Civil-Military Dynamics (2018–2023)



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Pakistan's economic history is deeply intertwined with its political landscape and geopolitical position. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has faced numerous economic challenges, shaped by a combination of domestic factors and global events. Initially, the country inherited a fragile economy from British India, with limited industrial infrastructure, an agrarian-based economy, and a heavy reliance on agriculture, particularly cotton, wheat, and rice. In the early years of independence, Pakistan's economy saw some growth, largely driven by foreign aid and investment from the United States during the Cold War period, as well as remittances from Pakistani workers abroad. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the first significant attempts to industrialize, with initiatives such as the establishment of state-owned industries and the development of basic infrastructure. However, economic growth was uneven, with rural areas lagging behind urban centers. This period also saw the rise of large landholding elites in the agricultural sector, which contributed to income inequality. The 1970s were marked by significant economic upheavals. The country faced a major political crisis, culminating in the separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971. The loss of East Pakistan, which was economically vital due to its strong industrial and agricultural base, devastated Pakistan's economy. The nationalization of major industries in the 1970s under the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto further hindered private sector growth and resulted in inefficiencies. In the 1980s, Pakistan's economy began to experience some recovery, largely due to foreign aid from the United States during the Afghan-Soviet war, which boosted military spending but left little for long-term development. The 1990s saw political instability, frequent changes in government, and the emergence of economic liberalization policies under successive governments. However, this period was also marked by high inflation, a growing fiscal deficit, and rising external debt. During the 2000s, under military rule led by General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan saw significant economic growth, driven by a combination of privatization, foreign investment, and growth in key sectors like telecommunications and manufacturing. However, this growth was often not inclusive, and the economy remained vulnerable to external shocks (Sohail Umar, 2021).

In recent years, particularly from 2010 to the present, Pakistan has faced a series of economic difficulties, including high inflation, a burgeoning fiscal deficit, a growing external debt, and political instability. Structural reforms have been slow, and the country's reliance on imports, particularly oil and gas, has led to trade imbalances. Pakistan's political economy has also been heavily impacted by security concerns, particularly in regions bordering Afghanistan and India, affecting investment and economic stability. Moreover, Pakistan's economic landscape has been further complicated by the impact of climate change, with recurring natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves adversely affecting agriculture, a key sector of the economy. Despite these challenges, remittances from the Pakistani diaspora have remained an



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important source of foreign exchange. Overall, the history of Pakistan's economy is a narrative of periods of growth interspersed with times of crisis, shaped by both internal and external factors. To achieve long-term stability and prosperity, Pakistan faces the ongoing challenge of balancing political, economic, and social reforms.

Analysis and Discussion

The period from 2018 to 2023 marked a defining era in Pakistan's civil-military relations, wherein the democratic veneer of civilian rule was increasingly overshadowed by behind-the-scenes military dominance. This chapter aims to analyze key political developments and institutional interactions during this period, focusing on the ways in which the military influenced, mediated, and at times directly intervened in the civilian political process. By using a combination of political event analysis, policy developments, and institutional behavior, this chapter provides a critical assessment of the hybrid governance model in Pakistan and its implications for political stability and democratic consolidation. Central to this discussion is the military's continued involvement in policy-making, electoral engineering, media control, and judicial manipulation, despite the absence of direct military rule. The events surrounding the 2018 elections, the ISI appointment controversy in 2021, and the no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022 are dissected to highlight the patterns of institutional power shifts. The chapter also critically examines how these developments have reinforced military supremacy while eroding civilian institutions' autonomy (Siddiqi, 2019; Fair, 2020).

The chapter further explores the evolving nature of military influence through new mechanisms of control, such as information warfare, strategic alliances with the judiciary and media entities, and public opinion shaping via social media platforms. These tools have allowed the military to maintain indirect dominance without the cost of overt political control. By tracing these trends, the chapter demonstrates how hybrid regimes in Pakistan continue to entrench authoritarian features under democratic facades (Yousaf, 2022; Jalal, 2020).

The analysis emphasizes how institutional imbalances, elite complicity, and weak rule of law have contributed to the cyclical crisis of democratic governance in Pakistan. The chapter not only provides a diagnostic view of the period under study but also raises critical questions about the future of the civil-military balance in Pakistan. Through this lens, the chapter offers both analytical depth and practical insights for understanding the enduring challenges to democratization in Pakistan (Ahmed, 2021; Mir, 2023).

Civil-Military Relations Early PTI Years and under PTI Government (2018–2022)

During the initial phase of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government under Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018–2020), civil-military relations appeared to be marked by remarkable institutional



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harmony. This period was characterized by a visible alignment between the civilian government and the military establishment, especially in foreign policy, national security, and internal stability matters. The military extended tacit support to PTI's governance agenda and reforms, particularly in accountability and anti-corruption initiatives, which often targeted opposition parties. Analysts viewed this cooperation as a continuation of the military's preference for a pliant civilian leadership that does not challenge its strategic autonomy, especially in domains traditionally controlled by the armed forces, such as foreign policy toward India, Afghanistan, and the United States (Rizvi, 2020).

Institutional Overreach and the Extension of COAS Bajwa

The most defining episode in PTI's civil-military dynamic was the controversial extension of General Qamar Javed Bajwa's tenure as Chief of Army Staff in 2019. Imran Khan's government pushed for a three-year extension, reflecting the centrality of the military in the decision-making matrix of the PTI administration. This move sparked legal and political debate, culminating in a Supreme Court ruling that called for legislation to regulate such extensions. The episode illustrated the blurred lines between civilian and military authority, highlighting the military's dominant institutional role while also exposing the PTI government's dependency on military backing for political stability and governance continuity (Yusuf, 2021).

Civil-Military Fractures Post-2021 and Policy Divergences

By late 2021, cracks began to appear in the PTI-military relationship. A critical point of divergence was the disagreement over the appointment of the Director-General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), where the PTI government delayed the formal notification of Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum's appointment. This event was interpreted as the civilian leadership's attempt to assert its authority, but it backfired, leading to visible tensions between the Prime Minister's Office and the General Headquarters (GHQ). The dispute underscored the military's resistance to civilian encroachment into its institutional prerogatives and emphasized how fragile the earlier "same-page" narrative truly was (Siddiqi, 2022).

The Military's Role in PTI's Downfall and Imran Khan's Rhetoric

The culmination of civil-military tensions was evident in the military's apparent neutrality or passive role during the vote of no confidence against Imran Khan in April 2022. Many observers argue that the military's withdrawal of support played a decisive role in the PTI government's collapse, although the institution officially denied political involvement. Subsequently, Imran Khan adopted a confrontational stance against the military, openly criticizing senior military leaders and accusing them of orchestrating regime change. This marked a dramatic shift in civil-military relations—from cooperation to confrontation—



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challenging the traditional norm where civilian leaders avoided directly challenging the military establishment (Nawaz, 2023).

Political Instability and Military Influence (2022–2023)

The political landscape of Pakistan underwent a seismic shift in April 2022 with the ousting of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a vote of no confidence. This event was a watershed moment that exposed deep fissures between the PTI government and the military establishment, which had earlier been perceived as key allies. Khan's removal, following the military's decision to step back from overt political alignment, catalyzed a period of intense political instability. The subsequent formation of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government under Shehbaz Sharif ushered in a fragile civilian coalition, plagued by questions of legitimacy and accusations of backdoor military support. The shift demonstrated how the military's withdrawal—or withholding—of political support could significantly influence the survival of civilian governments (Rafiq, 2022).

Post-Ouster Civil-Military Polarization and Khan's Narrative

Following his removal, Imran Khan adopted a highly confrontational stance toward the military, accusing senior army officials of orchestrating a "foreign-backed conspiracy" to topple his government. This rhetoric sharply departed from previous norms, where civilian leaders typically avoided direct confrontation with the military. Khan's repeated public criticism of the military, especially General Bajwa, reflected a significant breakdown in the traditional understanding of civil-military boundaries. These allegations stirred public sentiment, especially among PTI's core supporters, many of whom began to question the military's political neutrality. This polarization not only intensified political instability but also damaged the military's image as an apolitical institution (Abbas, 2023).

May 9, 2023 Riots and the Civil-Military Showdown

The arrest of Imran Khan on May 9, 2023, by paramilitary forces ignited nationwide protests, which escalated into violent attacks on military installations, including the Corps Commander's House in Lahore. The events of May 9 marked an unprecedented breakdown in civil-military relations, with civilians directly targeting military symbols. In response, the military leadership declared the protests a "black day" and initiated a crackdown on PTI leaders and supporters, many of whom were tried in military courts. This marked a reassertion of military authority and a shift back toward hardline control over dissent. The confrontation underscored how the military continues to act as both a political arbitrator and an enforcer, significantly undermining democratic norms during times of political crisis (Siddiq, 2023).



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Caretaker Setup and Military's Behind-the-Scenes Role

In the aftermath of the May 9 unrest and amid delayed general elections, the installation of a caretaker government in August 2023 under Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar raised fresh concerns about the military's behind-the-scenes influence. While the caretaker setup was constitutionally mandated, many analysts argued that the selection process and the subsequent governance model suggested deep military involvement, particularly through the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) narrative management and intelligence-driven security policies. The military's enhanced role in administrative decision-making, economic policy enforcement, and electoral oversight further blurred the civil-military divide. This period reaffirmed the military's status as the ultimate power broker in Pakistan's volatile political environment (Fair, 2023).

Institutional Power Shifts and Judiciary's Expanding Role in Political Affairs

Between 2022 and 2023, Pakistan's judiciary increasingly became a central actor in the country's power dynamics, especially amid heightened civil-military tensions and political instability. The Supreme Court and various High Courts frequently intervened in executive and legislative matters, ruling on politically sensitive issues such as the legality of the no-confidence vote against Imran Khan, the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial elections, and the arrest of political leaders. Critics argued that the judiciary's assertiveness was selective and at times aligned with military preferences, particularly when rulings favored institutional stability over democratic procedure. Nonetheless, the courts also resisted overt pressure in certain cases, which reflected the judiciary's complex and evolving relationship with both civilian and military power centers (Khan, 2023; Yusuf, 2023).

Military's Strategic Recalibration and Institutional Control

The period following Imran Khan's ousting marked a strategic recalibration in the military's political posture. Rather than overtly installing governments as in previous decades, the military focused on exerting influence through institutional dominance—particularly in areas like media regulation, economic policy oversight, and intelligence-led governance. Military-affiliated think tanks and bureaucratic extensions, such as the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), emerged as tools to steer national policy under the pretext of economic stabilization and national security. This model represented a shift from direct intervention to hybrid governance, wherein the military preserved de facto control while maintaining democratic façades (Siddiqi, 2023; Fair, 2023).



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Parliamentary Marginalization and Executive Volatility

During this period, Pakistan's parliament experienced increasing marginalization, particularly under the caretaker government appointed in 2023. With no electoral mandate and limited legislative authority, the caretaker setup functioned more as a technocratic extension of the state apparatus than a truly representative body. Even prior to the caretaker regime, the National Assembly struggled with legitimacy and quorum issues, with frequent walkouts and resignations from PTI lawmakers. This institutional weakness enabled both the military and judiciary to fill the political vacuum, thereby weakening democratic norms and reinforcing a power shift from elected institutions to unelected centers of authority (Zahid, 2023; Rafiq, 2022).

Media and Civil Society under Surveillance and Control

Another notable institutional shift occurred in the realm of media and civil society. Following the May 9 events, military-backed regulatory agencies intensified their surveillance of journalists, civil rights activists, and digital platforms. PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) issued frequent bans and directives curbing dissenting voices, especially those aligned with PTI or critical of the military. This silencing of the press and constraining of civil society space highlighted a broader strategy by the establishment to maintain narrative control. The shrinking of public discourse arenas illustrated how informal power increasingly resided with unelected security institutions rather than democratic stakeholders (Abbas, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Challenges & Opportunities

Persistent Politicization of the Military and Democratic Fragility

One of the most pressing challenges facing Pakistan's civil-military relations is the persistent politicization of the armed forces. The military's repeated involvement in political engineering, narrative control, and institutional manipulation has weakened public trust in democratic processes. The events surrounding Imran Khan's ouster and the subsequent crackdown on dissent exposed the extent to which the military continues to function as an extra-constitutional actor. This has undermined democratic norms, hollowed out parliamentary sovereignty, and contributed to regime volatility. Without meaningful reforms in civil-military balance, Pakistan risks remaining trapped in a cyclical pattern of democratic reversals (Siddiq, 2023; Yusuf, 2023).

Judicial Ambiguity and the Crisis of Constitutional Authority

Another core challenge is the judiciary's inconsistent role in resolving power struggles between civilian and military institutions. While the judiciary has occasionally asserted itself, such as in rulings that attempted to curb executive overreach or military impunity, it has also demonstrated selective interventionism, often aligning with dominant power interests. The lack of consistent jurisprudence and judicial



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independence contributes to legal uncertainty, eroding public confidence in the courts as neutral arbiters. This ambiguity complicates efforts to institutionalize civilian supremacy and contributes to a broader crisis of constitutional authority (Khan, 2023; Rafiq, 2022).

Opportunities for Reform through Democratic Consolidation

Despite these challenges, there are meaningful opportunities to reform civil-military relations through democratic consolidation and institutional strengthening. The growing public demand for transparent governance, judicial accountability, and civilian oversight offers a window for democratic forces to reassert authority. Civil society, legal activists, and a vibrant digital media sphere are gradually pushing back against autocratic tendencies. Reforms such as enhancing parliamentary committees on defense, enforcing constitutional limits on military roles in governance, and depoliticizing appointments in state institutions could contribute to a more stable civil-military equilibrium (Fair, 2023; Zahid, 2023).

Potential Role of International Norms and Strategic Rebalancing

International actors and institutions also present opportunities to incentivize civil-military reform. Pakistan's engagement with global financial bodies like the IMF and FATF requires enhanced transparency and civilian control over the financial and security sectors. Moreover, the shifting regional dynamics—especially in the context of China's investments through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—demand a more predictable and democratic governance structure. If leveraged wisely, these geopolitical and economic pressures could nudge Pakistan toward a more balanced institutional framework, reducing military dominance in non-security domains (Abbas, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Conclusion

The study of civil-military relations in Pakistan from 2018 to 2023 reveals a deeply entrenched pattern of military dominance, political volatility, and institutional imbalance. While the initial years of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government appeared to showcase a period of unprecedented civil-military harmony, this alliance was more tactical than transformational. It ultimately collapsed under the weight of competing interests, personal rivalries, and diverging strategic visions. The events that followed—including the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan, intensified judicial involvement, and the rise of a military-facilitated caretaker government—highlighted how power continued to reside largely outside the democratic framework.

Throughout this five-year period, Pakistan's political landscape was marked by recurring instability driven by the military's persistent influence in electoral processes, governance decisions, and media control. The military shifted its strategy from overt political engineering to more



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indirect forms of dominance, embedding itself in economic and administrative institutions such as the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). Meanwhile, the judiciary and parliament struggled to assert themselves as independent and effective branches of government. The May 9, 2023, protests—triggered by Khan’s arrest—symbolized a critical rupture in civil-military norms, as public anger spilled into open confrontation with the military, further exacerbating institutional tensions and political polarization. Despite these challenges, the thesis also identifies key opportunities for reform. Civil society activism, youth political engagement, digital media, and international democratic norms are gradually creating a space for renewed dialogue on civil-military balance. The path toward a stable democratic order depends on the restoration of constitutional supremacy, enhancement of civilian institutional capacity, and the demilitarization of political discourse. A long-term resolution requires strengthening parliamentary oversight, ensuring judicial independence, and establishing a clear framework for the military’s role within constitutional limits.

The 2018–2023 period demonstrates that while Pakistan’s democratic institutions continue to face systemic constraints, the crisis of civil-military relations has also galvanized calls for structural reform. The future trajectory of Pakistan’s political development will hinge on whether its civilian leadership can mobilize institutional resilience and public trust to reclaim democratic space, and whether the military can accept a redefined, constitutionally bound role within a truly democratic polity.

Findings

1. The PTI-military alliance was tactically driven and deteriorated as political interests diverged, underscoring the fragile and transactional nature of civil-military ties in Pakistan.
2. Even without formal rule, the military wielded significant influence over key policy areas through hybrid governance mechanisms like the National Security Committee, Inter-Services Public Relations and Special Investment Facilitation Council.
3. From 2018–2023, Pakistan’s political arena was marred by populism, institutional erosion, and military exploitation of instability to maintain influence.
4. The judiciary played a contradictory role—sometimes checking executive power, yet often complicit—reinforcing perceptions of politicization.
5. The violent fallout from Imran Khan’s arrest exposed deep public resentment toward military control and led to a repressive security crackdown.
6. The 2023 caretaker government, though constitutional, functioned as an extension of military interests, sidelining democratic legitimacy.



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7. Urban middle-class and youth activism surged in favor of civilian supremacy, with digital platforms and civil society challenging military dominance.
8. Pakistan's civil-military imbalance endures, and without institutional reform and credible democracy, political instability is set to continue.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen parliamentary oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in civil-military interactions.
2. Enforce constitutional limits on military involvement in political and policy domains through judicial and legislative reforms.
3. Empower civilian institutions with resources and autonomy to reclaim authority over governance and national security decision-making.
4. Promote judicial independence and consistency to restore public trust and provide a fair framework for civil-military conflict resolution.
5. Institutionalize civilian control over intelligence and internal security agencies to curb informal military influence.
6. Encourage inclusive political dialogue and electoral reforms to reduce polarization and deter extra-parliamentary interventions.
7. Support media freedom and digital rights to foster informed public discourse on civil-military dynamics.
8. Engage civil society and youth in democratic processes to build long-term resistance against authoritarian tendencies.
9. Recalibrate national security policies to balance defense imperatives with democratic governance principles.
10. Establish a national commission to evaluate and recommend reforms for sustainable and constitutional civil-military balance.

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