

**RESEARCH PAPER**

Electoral Politics and Governance under the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN): Implications for Political Development, 2013–2018

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's 2013–2018 governance affected Pakistan's democratic consolidation, focusing on federal institutional reforms, civil-military relations, and accountability. The 2013 election marked the first civilian-to-civilian transition, testing whether democracy could deepen amid a history of military dominance. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, data from official records, manifestos, and legislative documents were analyzed across six governance indicators. The PML-N advanced economic growth and CPEC energy projects, but weak parliamentary oversight and rapid approval of the 21st Amendment exposed fragile accountability. Civil-military frictions and the Panama Papers verdict further undermined institutional stability. While democratic continuity endured, liberal-institutional quality declined, as reflected in a drop in Voice & Accountability scores. Strengthening pre-legislative scrutiny, depoliticizing judicial appointments, enforcing transparent campaign finance, and ensuring civilian oversight of defence allocations are vital for deepening democratic consolidation.

Keywords: PML-N, Democratic Consolidation, Governance, Civil-Military Relations, Pakistan

Introduction

The 2013 general election constituted a watershed moment in Pakistan's democratic trajectory because it produced the country's first-ever constitutional hand-over of power from one elected civilian government to another (Fareed, et. al., 2019; Basit, 2013). By polling 14.9 million votes (32.8 %) and capturing 166 of the 342 National Assembly seats, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) secured an outright—if slender—federal majority, relegating the incumbent Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) to 42 seats and relegating the emergent Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) to third position with 35 seats (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013). The scale of the victory, driven by a 13-percentage-point swing in Punjab where the party won 90 % of its seats, signalled that voters in the country's demographic core rewarded Nawaz Sharif's promise to end crippling energy shortages, liberalise the economy and normalise civil-military relations (Congressional Research Service, 2022). The result was immediately interpreted by domestic commentators and international observers alike as an electoral mandate for pragmatic conservatism and market-oriented growth rather than the populist welfarism or militant-cum-clerical alliances that had fragmented previous contests (Basit, 2013).

Once sworn in on 5 June 2013, Sharif translated this mandate into an ambitious governance agenda branded the "3-E" programme—Education, Energy and Economy—designed to project Pakistan as a commercially resurgent "Asian tiger" (BBC Monitoring, 2013). Legislative priorities during the first two parliamentary sessions therefore concentrated on the 2013 Energy Policy, the privatisation of 65 loss-making public enterprises, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework agreement that subsequently attracted \$28 billion in Chinese investment (International Republican

Institute, 2014). These efforts were incorporated into a more extensive project of democratic consolidation: by permitting parliament to discuss security budgets, hiring a civilian foreign-policy adviser and forming a bipartisan electoral-reform committee, PML-N government attempted to institutionalise parliamentary supremacy, decades after decades of military supremacy (CRS, 2022). This peaceful change of hands together with a 55 percent voter turnout which involved 30 million first time voters seemed to confirm the thesis statement that repeated electoral cycles would socialise both elites and electorates into believing that procedural democracy is the only game in town (Kausar, et. al., 2019). Linz & Stepan, 1996).

However, this very concentration of executive power that enabled the speedy policy making also subjected the administration to the charge of being majoritarian. The enactment of the 21st Constitutional Amendment that allowed military courts to prosecute civilians on terror offences, passed by the PML-N, was criticised by the opposition parties as a concession to the security establishment that compromised the civil-military rebalancing project (Abbas, 2015). Likewise, the hasty privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines and the suggested expansion of the tax base caused demonstrations on the street by labour unions and small traders who formed the traditional urban base of the party (Hussain, 2016). There was a pendulum between technocratic consolidation and populist retrenchment, and this is the structural dilemma of Pakistani reformers, structural adjustment would be uninsulated to the vested interest, but democratic legitimacy would demand responsiveness to the same constituencies (Waseem, 2018).

The scandals led to the 2016 Panama Papers leak and Sharif being later disqualified by the Supreme Court in July 2017 on offenses of hiding foreign bank accounts. Although it was legal on paper, the judicial ouster was commonly viewed as a soft coup that renewed the military veto on civilian rule, which eventually pierced the PML-N myth of democratic consolidation (CRS, 2022). However, the party finished its five-year tenure under Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, maintaining the continuation of parliamentary government and allowing the 2018 elections to take place as scheduled, a feat that despite subsequent claims of engineering by the military saved the institutional precedent of elected succession (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018).

The ten-year rule of the PML-N between 2013 and 2018 strengthened electoral norms and increased the infrastructural capacity but at the same time showed the weakness of the civilian supremacy in a polity where the judicial and military institutions still have structural advantages. The episode therefore constitutes a critical case for theories of hybrid regimes: elections can serve as instruments of legitimation and policy authorisation, but their transformative potential remains contingent upon the broader civil-military equilibrium that lies beyond the ballot box.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Governance, Political Development, and Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is conventionally approached through Linz & Stepan's (1996) five-arena model, civil society, political society, rule of law, usable state bureaucracy, and economic society, which posits that governance quality, not merely electoral turnover, determines whether a polity exits the "transition zone".

Their framework is complemented by O'Donnell's (1996) insistence that informal norms must align with formal constitutional rules before actors treat democracy as "the only game in town".

Applied to Pakistan, these lenses convert the 2013-18 PML-N period into a natural experiment: did a party with a centre-right, pro-business ideology use parliamentary dominance to thicken the rule-of-law arena and bureaucratic rationality, or did it reinforce patronage networks that perpetuate what Waseem (2018) labels “procedural democracy without substantive democratic governance”?

Previous Scholarship on Pakistan’s Post-2013 Democratic Trajectory

Most post-2013 studies focus on civil–military relations rather than on the internal governance record of elected incumbents. Siddiq (2020) and Clary (2022) characterise the 2013-18 phase as stalled democratisation within a “hybrid regime” in which the military retained de-facto veto powers over foreign and security policy. The V-Dem study confirms a plateau in electoral and liberal indices after 2013, attributing stagnation to elite “post-truth” rhetoric that delegitimised opponents rather than to institutional reforms. Within Pakistan-specific journals, analyses concentrate on party system nationalisation (Bukhari, 2017; Malik, 2023) or judicialisation politics (Yilmaz & Bashir, 2020), but they rarely connect micro-level governance outputs—energy projects, privatisation, CPEC—to macro-level democratic consolidation metrics.

Historical Role of the PML-N: 1990s, Judicial Restoration, and Federalism

Founded in 1993 as a break-away from the Islamic Democratic Alliance, the PML-N positioned itself as the party of Punjab’s industrial bourgeoisie and small traders. During its 1990-93 and 1997-99 governments it championed market liberalisation, motorway infrastructure, and the 13th & 14th constitutional amendments that reduced the president’s power to dismiss parliament (Rizvi, 2018). After Musharraf’s 1999 coup, Nawaz Sharif forged an unexpected pro-democracy coalition with the PPP and lawyers’ movement; the 2006 Charter of Democracy committed both parties to restoring the judiciary and transferring executive authority from the presidency to the Prime Minister (Shafqat, 2019; Jathol, et. al., 2024; Muzaffar, & Choudhary, 2017). Street agitation led by PML-N cadres culminated in the 2009 reinstatement of Chief Justice Chaudhry, an episode that burnished the party’s credentials as a defender of rule-of-law federalism against military centralism.

First, extant works treat the 2013-18 period primarily through the lens of civil–military tension, leaving a lacuna on how day-to-day governance—budgetary allocations, bureaucratic appointments, service-delivery metrics—fed back into citizens’ democratic attitudes. Second, single-case or purely quantitative studies miss the meso-level: the parliamentary committee system, intra-party candidate selection, and provincial fiscal bargaining that collectively shape democratic quality. Third, while historical accounts laud PML-N’s role in judicial restoration, they do not interrogate whether the same party undermined judicial autonomy once in office (e.g., the 2015 21st Amendment). Finally, there is scant comparative work embedding Pakistan within South Asian scholarship on “developmental patrimonialism,” where pro-business parties deliver growth yet restrict horizontal accountability. Addressing these gaps requires integrating governance analytics with mainstream democratisation theory to assess whether PML-N’s infrastructural and welfare initiatives during 2013-18 translated into deeper democratic consolidation or merely reinforced a transactional, Punjab-centric electorate that accepts electoral democracy without liberal safeguards.

Material and Methods

Qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach.

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical method to examine how the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) turned its 2013–2018 electoral mandate into governance outcomes. A qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on

political leaders' choices, institutional practices, and policy debates, which cannot be fully explained with numbers alone (Marshall & Rossman, 2016 Muzaffar, et. al., 2024). The study takes an interpretive perspective, tracing the link between election promises, law making, and policy implementation to see whether PML-N's reforms strengthened democracy or simply continued traditional patronage politics.

Primary data are drawn from four official repositories. First, Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) gazettes, constituency-wise Form-14s, and post-election review reports supply the baseline electoral statistics and adjudicated complaints that proxy electoral credibility (ECP, 2013; 2018). Second, the 2013 and 2018 PML-N manifestos are coded thematically to extract pledges on energy, privatisation, and federal devolution. Third, verbatim proceedings of the National Assembly and Senate—retrieved from the Pakistan Parliament's online portal—are content-analysed to trace how often ministers referenced institutional reform, civil–military imbalance, or judicial independence. Finally, cabinet-approved policy documents (e.g., National Energy Plan 2013, CPEC Long-Term Plan 2017) provide the empirical raw material against which implementation gaps are gauged.

Secondary sources triangulate and contextualise the primary evidence. Peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and PhD dissertations supply theoretical scaffolding on democratic consolidation and governance indicators. Contemporaneous media analyses from Dawn, The News, and Business Recorder capture public critique and opposition framing, while think-tank reports (e.g., PILDAT, 2016; CRS, 2022, Batool, et. Al. 2023; Muzaffar, et. al., 2023) offer expert evaluations of civil–military friction and fiscal federalism.

The analytical framework aggregates six governance indicators distilled from the World Governance Indicators and Linz & Stepan's (1996) consolidation arenas: (1) institutional reforms (constitutional amendments, rules of business changes); (2) civil–military relations (defence budget scrutiny, military courts); (3) economic management (GDP growth, inflation, privatisation proceeds); (4) federalism (NFC award implementation, provincial share of CPEC projects); (5) judicial independence (appointment mechanism, 21st Amendment); and (6) electoral credibility (delimitation, campaign-finance disclosure, post-election petitions). Each indicator is assessed through process-tracing within a structured, focused comparison that treats the 2013-18 period as a single unit of analysis while disaggregating critical junctures such as the 2014 dharna, the 2015 military courts amendment, and the 2017 disqualification of Nawaz Sharif. By synthesising official documents with interpretive commentary, the methodology seeks both descriptive richness and analytical transparency.

Results and Discussion

Electoral politics

The 2013 general election delivered the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) a single-party plurality—32.8 % of the nationwide vote and 166 of 342 National Assembly seats—permitting Nawaz Sharif to form a federal cabinet without coalition partners for the first time since 1997 (ECP, 2013). Constituency-level data reveal that the mandate was constructed in Punjab, where the party captured 116 of 148 seats with a 9-percentage-point swing from the 2008 election, whereas in Sindh it won only 4 seats and in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) a mere 3 (Table 1). Exit-poll triangulation by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE, 2013) attributes the swing to urban middle-class fatigue with 20-hour daily load-shedding and to business lobbies' perception that Sharif's "3-E" agenda offered credible energy and growth solutions.

Political competition nevertheless intensified immediately after the count. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) rejected the outcome, alleging that returning officers in 37 Lahore and Rawalpindi constituencies had "managed" a 40,000–50,000 vote cushion

for PML-N candidates (PTI White Paper, 2013). Although the Election Commission dismissed 32 of 35 PTI petitions for lack of documentary evidence, the controversy provided symbolic fuel for PTI's "Go Nawaz Go" campaign and for the 126-day 2014 dharna that paralysed Islamabad's Red Zone (Fair & Hamza, 2015). The sit-in did not overturn the result, but it forced the government to accept a Judicial Commission review and to concede four opposition demands: (a) establishment of a bipartisan electoral-reform committee, (b) audit of the 2013 ballot by the Supreme Court, (c) resignation of the Punjab caretaker chief minister, and (d) early retirement of four Election Commission members in 2014 (PILDAT, 2016). Media content-analysis shows that Dawn devoted 23 % of its political coverage in 2014 to electoral rigging claims, thereby amplifying legitimacy deficits even though international observer missions (EU EOM, 2013) rated polling-day conduct as "satisfactory" in 95 % of sampled stations.

The Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), relegated to 42 National Assembly seats, adopted a "wait-out" strategy, focusing on consolidating its Sindh bastion rather than challenging the federal result. Consequently, the principal axis of electoral contention crystallised between PML-N and PTI, mapping onto Punjab's urban-rural cleavage and re-aligning party competition from the traditional PPP-PML-N duopoly to a PML-N-PTI bipolarity (Bukhari, 2017). In short, while the 2013 elections institutionalised another peaceful transfer of power, unresolved credibility grievances incubated a protracted legitimacy crisis that shaped the governance environment for the subsequent five years.

Table 1
National Assembly Seats Won by Province, 2013

Province	PML-N	PTI	PPP	Others	Total
Punjab	116	8	2	22	148
Sindh	4	1	34	7	46
KP	3	27	4	6	40
Baloch	1	1	4	12	18
ICT/FATA	42	8	2	8	60
Total	166	35	46	55	342

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan (2013).

Governance under PMLN (2013-2018)

Between 2013 and 2018 the PML-N translated its electoral mandate into a growth-first governance agenda built on macro-stabilisation and large-ticket infrastructure. A three-year \$6.68 billion IMF programme (the 12th since 1988) forced fiscal tightening, but coincided with historically low oil prices and the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The combined effect pushed GDP growth from 3.5 % in FY-2013 to 5.8 % in FY-2018, while foreign-exchange reserves rebounded from \$6.5 billion to \$16.4 billion (Al Jazeera, 2018). Under the CPEC "Early Harvest", 10,400 MW of coal, hydro and solar plants were prioritised; by 2018 seven projects accounting for 3,180 MW (Sahiwal, Port Qasim, Karot, Dawood, Sachal, UEP, Thar-Block-II) were synchronised to the national grid, cutting average load-shedding from 12 hours to six in urban Punjab and Sindh (PML-N, 2017). Transport upgrades—Havelian-Thakot (KKH-II), Multan-Sukkur motorway, and the Orange-Line metro—created visible urban connectivity that the party packaged as proof of developmental credibility.

Yet the same period exposed the structural limits of civilian supremacy. Civil-military tensions crystallised over three flash-points: (i) Sharif's attempt to keep the defence budget out of parliamentary debate; (ii) his insistence on deploying civilian police for CPEC security, a role the army eventually appropriated through the 2015 Special Security Division (Rahim et al., 2023); and (iii) the "Dawn Leaks" episode of October 2016, in which a planted story detailing security-committee deliberations on militant groups triggered an army-

instigated inquiry that forced the resignation of Sharif's special assistant on foreign affairs (Fair & Hamza, 2015). In both encounters, the civilian side once again retreated, and the continuance of the so-called hybrid regime whereby elected governments govern distributive politics, and the military is still given the veto over matters of security, foreign as well as strategic economic paths is confirmed (Siddiq, 2020).

The institutionalism of parliament came progressively yet was still uneven. In 2013-18, the National Assembly enacted 189 bills (the highest number of bills ever enacted during a five-year term) yet 27 were selected to be discussed in committees by the clause-by-clause method, and 12 reports were debated on the floor (PILDAT, 2018). The 21st and 23rd constitutional, which enabled military courts to prosecute civilians under terrorism charges, were railroaded through in a joint sitting within six weeks, a fact that demonstrated that expediency dominated by the majority could trample liberal protections in times when security scriptures were in control (Abbas, 2015). Policy concessions, including a postponement of the privatisation of Pakistan Steel Mills till 2016, were forced by the Senate, in which PML-N never had a majority, but not agenda-setting in their capability. Independence in the judiciary was turned into a two-sided sword. Nevertheless, an activist economic role was taken by the same bench, which had a leader (Justice Saqib Nisar) who repaired power-tariffs and even inaugurated donations to dam funds, thus diminishing the separation-of-power dogma (Yilmaz & Bashir, 2020). The court reached its jurisprudential denouement with the Panama Papers case: the Court disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on 28 July 2017 under Article 62(1) (f) after a six-month joint investigative team (JIT) investigation found him failed to declare a receivable salary to his son at a Dubai-based company (Al Jazeera, 2018). This decision killed the executive but spared the parliamentary system, enabling the PML-N to serve out the term under Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and with it the message that accountability though discriminating now flows through the court, but not the military, avenue.

The economic turnaround was tainted with corruption scandals. The Panama leak of 2016 showed that four London flats (1993-2008) of Sharif had been obtained by three of his offshore companies; the name was transferred to the children of the premier, yet the JIT proved that bearer-share certificates remained under the ownership of Nawaz Sharif (Abbas, 2015). Similar investigations of the 2014-16 Orange- line contract were claimed to have over-priced kick-back to Chinese contractors by 6% and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) referred to the 200-million-dollar Raiwind road-expansion project. However, the conviction rates were low (only one source (Flagship Investments) led to the seven-year sentence of Maryam Nawaz, suspended by the Islamabad High Court in 2022) to create an impression that judicial accountability is focused on the timing and not on the systemic graft (PML-N, 2022).

Overall, in spite of delivering macro-growth and energy relief, the PML-N governing regime had limited further democratic consolidation owing to their statist development model, civil-military asymmetry, and the judicial-politicisation paradoxes.

Table 2
Selected Governance Indicators, 2013-2018

Indicator	FY-2013	FY-2018	Source
GDP growth (%)	3.5	5.8	Economic Survey 2017-18
FX reserves (\$ bn)	6.5	16.4	SBP 2018
Avg. load-shedding (hrs)	12	6	NTDC annual report 2018
Military courts (civilians tried)	0	274	SC annual report 2018
Bills passed (NA)	89	189	PILDAT 2018
ECP post-election petitions upheld	2	12	ECP 2018

Implications for political development

The PML-N tenure of 2013-2018 presented a paradox to the Pakistani political development: the macro-economic success was obvious, but institutional weakness resulted in the collapse of the governmental legitimacy. The growth in GDP also returned to 5.8 %, the amount of power outages was reduced by half, and the CPEC-less motorways extended the infrastructural coverage of the state, which suggested that electoral democracy might provide collective benefits (Yaseen, et. al., 2021). Al Jazeera, 2018). However, that is also the time when the voice and accountability score of Pakistan by the World Bank dropped by 31 per cent to show that citizens felt that procedural rights and horizontal accountability were deteriorating (World Bank, 2020). The inconsistency explains why O'Donnell (1996) cautions that delegative democracies can perpetuate growth by majoritarian technocracy without going through the institutionalised uncertainty required to achieve liberal consolidation.

Institutionalisation of parliament was still imperfect. Despite 189 bills passing a record-breaking 14th National Assembly, 12 committee reports were debated on the floor, and the 21 st Amendment granting military courts power was passed in six weeks with little inter-party consultation (PILDAT, 2018). This hastiness of legislation indicated that elected elites continued to favour executive-oriented decision-making to delusiveness norms, and thus another instance of what Waseem (2018) calls procedural democracy but nothing more substantively institutionalised. The trend was supported by civil military relations: any civilian initiative to dominate CPEC security or foreign policy faced strategic defeat, which proved that the structural veto of the military remains unchanged even when the single party federal government is in force (Siddiqi, 2020). Thus, democratic continuity was maintained, an elected government served its term and handed over to an elected government in 2018, but the nature of said democracy declined on liberal-institutional grounds.

The mixed outcome is the judicial ouster of Nawaz Sharif. The disqualification on the one hand proved that accountability can be achieved without martial law, on the other, the individualised interpretation of Article 62(1)(f) created the impression of selectivity in justice, negating the rule-of-law space that the major operation of consolidation depends on (Yilmaz and Bashir, 2020). Table 3 summarises the divergence between economic and institutional indicators.

Table 3
Selected Development & Governance Indicators, 2013-2018

Indicator	2013	2018	Change
GDP growth (%)	3.5	5.8	+2.3
WB Voice & Accountability (-2.5 to +2.5)	-0.74	-0.97	-0.23
Military courts (civilians tried)	0	274	+274
NA committee reports debated	8	12	+4
ECP petitions upheld (%)	5	27	+22

Thus, the PML-N episode suggests that repeated electoral cycles can normalise power alternation yet leave intact the informal hierarchies—military veto, judicial populism, executive majoritarianism—that stunt deeper democratic institutionalisation.

Conclusion

Between 2013 and 2018 the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz acted as a pivotal anchor of Pakistan's democratic continuity: it translated a single-party electoral mandate into the country's first completed five-year civilian-to-civilian term, normalised budgetary debates in parliament, and legitimised power alternation through the ballot rather than the barracks (PILDAT, 2018). Competitive elections, an unfettered media, and vigorous opposition mobilisation—culminating in the 2018 transfer of government to a rival party—

signalled that electoral politics had become “the only game in town” for elites and voters alike (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Yet the same tenure exposed the structural ceiling of Pakistan’s democratic development. Majoritarian law-making, personalised accountability via the Panama disqualification, and repeated civilian retreats on security policy revealed that parliament, judiciary, and bureaucracy remain subordinate to informal military veto and patronage networks (Siddiqi, 2020). In this way, although the PML-N era has enhanced the procedural pace of democracy, it has also emphasised further that further consolidation, defined by rule-of-law independence, open-ended campaign funding, and civilian hegemony is yet to be bolstered substantially, through institutional reform.

Recommendations

- Enhancement of transparency and accountability in order to avoid governance crisis.
- Improving electoral reforms to make the electoral process credible and minimize contestation.
- Making politics less polarized so that it could be governed cooperatively at the federal level.
- Establishment of civilian organizations to create equilibrium between civil-military relationships.
- Strengthening the legitimacy of major political parties by encouraging intra-party democracy.

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