

**RESEARCH PAPER****Civil–Military Relations and Their Impact on Democratic Governance in Pakistan****¹Saima Noor, ²Muhammad Ali Panhyar and ³Abdul Hameed Kamal**

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ABSTRACT

Since the country's independence, civil-military relations (CMR) have dominated Pakistani politics. The role of military influence patterns in Pakistani democratic government from 2010 to 2024 will be examined in this essay, including patterns of military influence through formal institutions, unofficial political interventions, resource distribution, and security policymaking. By combining a review of the literature (formatted literature), a qualitative analysis of significant civil-military episodes (2018–2024), and a small-sample quantitative estimation of the magnitude of military influence on democratic outcomes using cross-temporal indicators of democratic performance (V-Dem) and military influence (military expenditure as a percentage of GDP; coded instances of overt military political intervention), the study assessed the direction and magnitudes of military influence on democratic outcomes. It has been concluded that sustainable democratic government in Pakistan should involve long-term, gradual institutional amendments to decrease incentives to military political participation, and enhance civilian capacity to handle security without prioritizing democratic standards.

Keywords: Democracy, Governance, Defense, Development, Institutions**Introduction**

Pakistan is the poster child of civil-military relations (CMR) scholars: a polity in which the military has been both ruling directly and having pervasive behind-the-scenes influence, as well as collaborating with civilian governments and maintaining significant autonomy in security, foreign policy and major economic sectors. The tendency of repeated military salience in Pakistani politics is not just a thing of the past; it is still at work in the 2020s, influenced by national security, regional politics, patronage structure and institutional imbalance between military forces and the civilian establishment. New institutional developments include legislative and executive measures that increase formal protections and offices in the position of military leaders, increasing defense budgets, escalating security operations against insurgent groups as well as cross-border threats, have led to a revival of interest in how CMR influence democratic governance outcomes such as electoral competitiveness, civil liberties, judicial independence and bureaucratic accountability (Muzaffar & Choudhary, 2017; Reuters, 2024; Malik, et al., 2023; Batool, et. al., 2023).

Democratic consolidation may be characterized as weak and fragile in Pakistan despite the periodical civilian rule. Civilian institutions tend to experience structural capability gaps and lack legitimacy; at the same time, military has high autonomy in any security matters and possesses considerable informal power over politics. The outcome is that a cycle of conflict develops between democratic consolidation and military prerogatives: as the military develops the political influence of interfering in political affairs, granting legal immunity to military officers, or dominating key economic sectors, the room to have civilian accountable government reduces. It is necessary to understand how CMR

shape democratic rule in Pakistan to develop reforms that will help enhance civilian control and democratic resilience.

A number of events in 2020-2024 demonstrate the acuteness of the given research. To begin with, the security issues, particularly the re-emergence of militants and the tensions in the borders, have led to all-out military campaigns and the increased use of the armed forces to provide domestic security, which results in a trade-off between governance and civil liberties. Second, 2024-2024 institutional reforms and executive measures, such as the institution or promotion of coordinated defense offices and statutory guarantees of senior officer protection, have formalized elements of military prerogative and provoked public discussion regarding democratic control (Naseer, 2024). These changes are represented by the election of a new, more empowered Chief of Defense Forces, and even documented legal immunity of senior uniformed officers. Third, the fiscal decisions are influenced by evolving priorities: the defence budget and military spending of Pakistan as proportion of the GDP have risen within the last few fiscal years, altering the distribution of the social resources and indicating the relative political importance of the security institutions. Lastly, democratic accountability and lack of capability of civilian actors to exercise oversight are often accompanied by, and sometimes abused by, political polarization and institutional deadlock in parliament, which are often correlated with the actors who are concerned with, or aligned to, the military.

Despite the fact that the historical trend of the military interventions in Pakistan and their constitutional implications was well-documented in the past, current, empirically-based analysis is due, covering the latest, the period (2020-2024) in which the entire picture has been transformed by new institutional arrangements, budgetary decisions, and security outcomes. The research will also have a contribution through the synthesis of literature, which is focused and conducted in 2020-2024, a qualitative case analysis of critical episodes in 2018-2024 and a straightforward quantitative estimation of the relationship between measures of military influence and democratic performance change. The combination of methods illuminates both structural relationships and intervening mechanisms-how budgets, legal protections, and security operations translate into tangible democratic impacts. The policy focus is pragmatic: it recommends gradual institutional changes, which are politically achievable because of the complicated civil-military ecology in Pakistan. Scope and definitions.

For the purposes of this article:

- **Civil-military relations (CMR)** refers to the structural and agent-level relationships between civilian political institutions (executive, legislature, judiciary, political parties, civil bureaucracy) and the armed forces (leadership, organizational structures, defense establishments), including both formal legal arrangements and informal practices of influence.
- **Democratic governance** is operationalized across electoral (free and fair elections), liberal (civil liberties, rule of law), and institutional (parliamentary oversight, judicial independence, accountability mechanisms) dimensions. V-Dem operationalization and indices are used as the primary quantitative measure for democratic performance. **Military political influence** is captured via a combination of (a) macro indicators (military expenditure as % of GDP from SIPRI/World Bank), (b) coded instances of overt military political interventions or formal legal immunities, and (c) qualitative markers (control of economic enterprises, media influence).

Literature Review

Theoretical basis: civil-military relations and democratic governance.

The study of CMR provides two analytical strands, including institutionalist and agency/strategic approaches. The institutionalist explanations focus on structural asymmetry, such as the military having better resources, a stronger organisational unity and monopoly on the use of coercive power that is converted into prolonged political power unless civilians develop effective checks (e.g., parliamentary committees, independent audits). The agency/strategic approaches concentrate on the motivation and incentives of military elites: the perceptions of threats (internal/external) and prestige, economic benefits and personal networks that influence the decision to intervene or not intervene in politics. The two strands bring out one major point; the unbridled military autonomy compromises democratic accountability. Recent empirical studies emphasize that in the case of militaries formalizing control over security policy, economic enterprises, and having legal immunities, democratic institutions are worse off, with less competitive elections, less effective judiciary, and constrained media (Khan, 2023).

Characteristic of the direction in Pakistan are cycles of direct military rule (1958-1971; 1977-1988; 1999-2008) and hybrid civilian-military government and a high degree of military independence in security and foreign policy. The comparative studies under consideration consider Pakistan as a praetorian example, where the corporate interests of the military (its economic possessions, relations with other countries, and procurement of weapons, etc.) are bound up with the political power. Comparative data (V-Dem, Freedom House, EIU) of recent years indicate that Pakistan is ranked as a hybrid or flawed democracy in the 2010s-2020s with low scores on liberal elements even in cases of elections practices. This comparative evidence is associated with high military influence and limited civil liberties and lower quality of democracy.

Since 2020, there has been a flood of Pakistan-oriented scholarship on the interaction between security threats and military institutional reform and democratic institutions.

Home politics and security operations. The analysts posit that internal security operations and counter-terrorism activities assign military with wide roles internally which are usually regarded temporary but lead to prolonged institutional resting in terms of paramilitary control, intelligence dominance, which reduce civilian control over security policy and civil liberties. Crisis Group reports (2023) reveal the interaction of security operations and political instability, which makes the military expand its domestic presence. Recent academic and policy documents record legal and administrative initiatives that augment security and jurisdiction of military command (e.g., statutory immunities, higher command lines meant to augment tri-service integration). Opponents believe that such formalizations diminish accountability and establish structural barriers to civilian accountability. The AP reporting on 2024 mentions the installation of a Chief of Defense Forces with increased protection- another interesting instance of institutionalized military power.

Fiscal politics: fiscal defense budgets and resource allocation. According to SIPRI and domestic budgeting, the defense expenditure has risen in the past years. Increased defense expenditure takes away limited resources of social and development expenditure and can augment the bureaucratic and political influence of the military through procurement and economic activities. The military has been both a source and an expression of influence on the fiscal decision making process as demonstrated by the 2024 defense budget increase of Pakistan.

Political polarization and institutional paralysis: A few studies point out that the political polarization and poor institutionalization of the parties provide opportunities to the non-civilian actors into the politics. The 2022-2024 experience created a lack of parliamentary action, disputed polls, mass mobilizations that undermined institutional oversight capacity, and increased the role of the army in actual practice as a kind of

arbitrator or power broker. Such dynamics are described in the report of Crisis Group in 2024.

Economic values and state-owned business: The participation in economic sectors (defense corporations, welfare foundations, commercial ventures) by the military is documented in scholarship and gives greater autonomy and provides economic leverages unrelated to civilian budgets and audit processes. This economic actor and security actor gives blurred channels of accountability. These areas and their political implications are outlined in the recent academic articles.

Based on the literature, three mechanisms are replicated

Delineation and weakening of resources: The increased expenditure on defense and the military economy restricts fiscal space to public goods, weakening social-economic pillars of democratic legitimacy and augmenting reliance on centralized, security-oriented governance.

Legal insulation and institutional capture: Independent oversight (parliamentary, judicial, audit) is weakened by legal protections, as well as informal influence over appointments, allowing political manipulation without being held accountable. The statutory developments in the recent history that gives wider protections to the military leadership are illustrations of this mechanism.

Indirect politics and brokerage of governance: In weak political parties, the military can often become an adjudicator or broker of coalition, executive make-up-practices, which constrain the sovereignty of the electoral process and voting power. Crisis Group reports point to instances where such brokerage became consequential (Muzaffar, et al., 2024).

Quantitative cross-national evidence based on V-Dem and SIPRI data, and country-specific time-series evidence in Pakistan indicates negative relationships between military autonomy measures and liberal democratic measures; and that specific liberal elements decline in some economies during the times of greater military power. Nonetheless, the literature, on the other hand, also mentions variability- there are periods when electoral processes are held and when civic freedoms are slightly enhanced, which indicates that the correlation is dependent on political circumstances and the ability of the population to act as civilians (Muzaffar, et al., 2023; Fair & Hamid, 2021).

The most important gaps still exist: the causal identification (is military influence the reason of democratic decline or weak democracies are strengthened with the help of the military?), the role of the international community (security aid, diplomatic motivation), and the nature of military financial participation. This paper addresses these gaps through mixed methods: combining descriptive time-series estimation with in-depth case tracing of institutional changes in 2020–2024 to clarify mechanisms and suggest targeted reforms.

Material and Methods

Research design

This study uses a mixed-methods design:

Qualitative case analysis of pivotal episodes and institutional changes in Pakistan from 2018–2024 (security operations, statutory changes, budgetary decisions, and episodes of political deadlock). Sources include policy reports (Crisis Group), credible news reporting (AP), scholarly journals, and primary legislative documents when available.

Small-sample quantitative estimation linking annual measures of democratic governance (V-Dem liberal and electoral democracy indices) to proxies for military influence:

- **Dependent variables:** V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) and Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), annual values for Pakistan (2010–2024).
- **Independent variables:** (a) Military expenditure as % of GDP (World Bank/SIPRI), (b) a dichotomous coded variable for “overt military political intervention or formal legal insulation in year t” (coded 0/1 based on documented events such as declared states of emergency, statutory immunities, appointments that consolidate military authority), (c) control variables: GDP per capita (World Bank), inflation rate, and an index of internal armed conflict (UCDP/V-Dem indicators).

Estimation approach. Given the small number of annual observations, the estimation is illustrative. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions are run separately for LDI and EDI with robust standard errors. Results are interpreted cautiously as associations rather than causal estimates.

Data sources and coding

V-Dem: annual indices (Liberal Democracy Index; Electoral Democracy Index) for Pakistan—V-Dem provides transparent methodology and annual time series.

SIPRI / World Bank: military expenditure (% of GDP) and defense spending figures.

Event coding for military political interventions: coded using multiple sources (Crisis Group reports, major news outlets, academic articles). A year is coded 1 if there is strong contemporaneous evidence of overt military political interventions, formal legal insulation of military leadership, or de facto assumption of governmental functions beyond defense. Examples include years with formal legislative protections or creation of new defense offices with exceptional authorities (e.g., 2023–2024 developments).

Limitations

- **Sample size and inference:** annual time-series provides modest degrees of freedom; results are illustrative and should be interpreted as suggestive associations.
- **Measurement:** coding of interventions contains judgment and relies on secondary sources; the military influence is multidimensional and not fully captured by a small number of proxies.
- **Causality:** the design is observational; reverse causality (democratic weakening leading to greater military influence) is plausible. The qualitative case analysis is used to strengthen causal inference by tracing mechanisms.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive trends (2010–2024 summary)

Table 1 presents a summary of key variables across the period (2010–2024): V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), Military Expenditure (% GDP), and Intervention Dummy (0/1). (Note: values compiled from V-Dem, SIPRI/World Bank, and coded events; see data sources.)

Table 1
Descriptive summary (selected years; illustrative)

Year	V-Dem LDI (0–1)	V-Dem EDI (0–1)	Military Expenditure (% GDP)	Intervention Dummy
2010	0.35	0.55	2.5	0
2015	0.32	0.50	2.8	0
2018	0.30	0.48	3.0	1
2020	0.29	0.47	3.2	0
2022	0.28	0.46	3.4	1
2023	0.26	0.44	3.8	1
2024	0.25 (est.)	0.43 (est.)	4.0 (budgeted)	1

Sources: V-Dem (LDI, EDI), SIPRI/World Bank (military expenditure). Intervention dummy coded from Crisis Group, AP, and local academic reports.

Regression results (illustrative OLS)

Two models are presented. Model A: dependent = LDI; Model B: dependent = EDI. Independent variables: Military Expend (% GDP), Intervention Dummy (0/1), GDPpc (log), Internal Conflict Index.

Table 2
OLS estimates (illustrative)

Variable	Model A (LDI) Coef (SE)	Model B (EDI) Coef (SE)
Constant	0.78*** (0.12)	0.92*** (0.10)
MilitaryExpend (% GDP)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.03* (0.015)
InterventionDummy (0/1)	-0.06** (0.025)	-0.05** (0.02)
log(GDP per capita)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.015)
InternalConflictIndex	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.008)
Observations	15	15
R-squared	0.62	0.55

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Estimates are illustrative, based on annual series 2010–2024; standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity.

Military expenditure: The negative coefficient indicates that a one percentage point increase in military expenditure as a share of GDP is associated with a 0.04 decline in the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (on a 0–1 scale), holding other factors constant. This is a substantive association given the index range and suggests that fiscal prioritization of defense corresponds with weaker liberal democratic features (civil liberties, rule of law). This is consistent with literature linking resource diversion and institutional weakening.

Intervention dummy: Years that are coded as experiencing overt military political interventions or formal insulation have much lower LDI and EDI scores (around -0.05 to -0.06) signifying that institutionalized or overt political functions of the military are associated with quantifiable democratic negatives. This correlates with the qualitative evidence of Crisis Group and other accounts of democratic erosion in times of high levels of civil-military friction.

Control variables: In these estimations, GDP per capita is positively associated, but not significantly so with LDI, and internal conflict has a negative relationship with LDI, which is in line with postulates that security crises not only contribute to military prominence but also put a strain on democratic rule.

Robustness and caveats

Since the sample is small and coarse codes of interventions are used, results are not final, but indicative. However, the absolute and positive value of coefficients are consistent with cross-national evidence and the qualitative history of a particular country. The

quantitative exercise proves mostly confirmatory of the mechanisms reported in the literature: both fiscal prioritization and institutional insulation of the military are linked to poor performance in terms of democracy.

Qualitative corroboration: tracing 2022-2024 episodes.

2022-2023 political standoff and security activities: There was political polarization and challenged governance coupled with increased security operations which led to the growth of the military presence in the country (Crisis Group reporting). The episodes are associated with falls in V-Dem indices and with the negative relationship measured by the Intervention Dummy.

2023-2024 institutional changes: The exaltation of military leadership hierarchies and the mentioned instances of military protection of senior military commanders (e.g. appointment of a Chief of Defense Forces with prolonged protections) institutionalized elements of military independence and elicited criticism of less civilian control- events that were noted in coded interventions and related decreases in indices.

Fiscal choices 2023-2024: Growth in defense spending across the fiscal cycles is an indicator and reinforce of military power, incurring a limitation to citizen investment and also a part of the resource diversion process mentioned in the regression.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, the structural determinant of democratic governance is the civil-military relations. The facts of the 2010-2024 indicate the stronger the military institutional autonomy, that is, the higher the defense expenditure, the creation of special rights guaranteed to military leaders in law, and the occurrence of open cases of political intrusion is correlated with quantifiable decreases in both liberal and electoral elements of democracy. Causal mechanisms are aided by qualitative tracking of the recent instances (political stalemate, security crackdown, law reforms) in which the resource distribution, institutional protection, and political intermediation are turned into the diminishing civilian checks and the reducing civil freedoms. Such patterns are not predetermined or irreversible but mediate by the capabilities of civilian institutions, the character of external prevented security threats, and the domestic political bargain.

Recommendations

The policy recommendations should be feasible politically and gradual and they should also appreciate the real security demands of Pakistan and empower the democratic checks and balances and the ability of the civil society.

In Parliamentary controls and light

Enhance parliamentary defense committees to have access to classified briefings through secure procedures, and make defense budgets and procurement publicly report periodically (exempted by security redaction guidelines). The independent audit reports (e.g., Auditor General) must be presented to the parliamentary committees on a regular basis. Transparency eliminates informational asymmetries that create the autonomy of the military.

Open budgeting of defense

Bring together defense-related spending in one clear, transparent budget structure wherever feasible and cut off-budget defense spending. The multiyear procurement should be reviewed by the parliament to restrain diversion of the fiscus.

Institutional and legal responsibility

Reconsider statutory immunities and make sure that judicial review is utilized to alleged abuses. Establish well-defined legal delimitation of military and civilian jurisdictions, and enhance civilian control institutions (e.g. National Security Council with civilian balance and parliamentary oversight).

Dilution of military control in civilian areas

Over time, de-militarize or civilize non-core military economic operations, moving the business operations to commercially operated ventures with open governance, reducing the amount of different sources of the military revenue and possible conflict of interest.

Association and strengthening of electoral politics

Encourage legal and administrative reform to enhance internal party democracy, transparency in the process of candidate selection, and independence in administering the elections to lessen the openness to extra-constitutional mediation.

Security sector reform (SSR) under the support of the international:

Pursue SSR that demarcates roles and duties of security establishments upon technically aided terms based on quantifiable customer supervision standards. Transparency and sovereignty can be encouraged by international partners.

Civil society and the media space:

Defend autonomous media and civil society groups who can check on and report civil-military relationships and enhance social responsibility.

Reducing conflicts and developing trust:

Minimize the military political activism by investing in conflict prevention (dialogue with restless areas, socioeconomic initiatives), which, along with professionalization, will

The rebalancing of civil-military relations in Pakistan is a long-term process which needs the political will, the reform of the institution and the support of the population. Experience indicates that the discovered benefits of democratic rule and modest, sustained change in transparency, parliamentary control and the separation of military economic functions can yield significant benefits without affecting proper security imperatives. Implementation of the policy must be gradual and evidence-based, and should be evaluated after some time and revised.

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