



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
 Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
 Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Hybrid Democracy of Pakistan: A Challenge to the Sovereignty of People

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's political system defies simple binary classification, operating persistently as a hybrid democracy. This model strategically blends formal democratic institutions, such as periodic elections and a constitutional framework, with an entrenched authoritarian core dominated by the country's military establishment. This article argues that this hybridity poses a fundamental and systemic challenge to the principle of popular sovereignty, wherein the people are constitutionally mandated as the ultimate source of political authority. Through a qualitative and analytical methodology, this study deconstructs the key pillars upholding this hybrid regime. It examines the sophisticated mechanisms of political engineering that transform elections into instruments of management rather than expressions of popular will. It further analyzes the judicial interface that often legitimizes establishment preferences, the coercive media management apparatus that controls public discourse, and the military's vast economic empire, which creates a powerful vested interest in maintaining the political status quo. The cumulative impact of these structures is a severe sovereignty deficit, rendering parliament subservient on critical national policies and eroding public trust in the democratic process itself. The article concludes that the gap between the constitutional ideal of popular sovereignty and the de facto reality of military dominance is the defining crisis of Pakistani governance. Without a decisive shift towards genuine civilian supremacy, the sovereignty of the people will remain a theoretical concept, perpetually subordinated to the interests of an unelected oligarchy.

Keywords: Hybrid Democracy, Pakistan, Popular Sovereignty, Military Establishment, Political Engineering, Civil-Military Relations, Competitive Authoritarianism

Introduction

Pakistan presents a profound political paradox: a nation that holds regular elections yet is persistently governed by powerful, unelected institutions. Since its transition to a nominal democracy in 2008, the country has conducted multiple general elections, each punctuated by vibrant, if not chaotic, political campaigning. However, this veneer of electoral democracy belies a starker reality where ultimate authority often resides not with the representatives chosen by the people, but with the permanent military establishment. This enduring power dynamic creates a political system where civilian governments operate within narrowly defined and often mutable boundaries, their survival contingent upon the acquiescence of the generals. The very institutions designed to be pillars of the state the parliament and the executive frequently appear as secondary actors in a play whose script is primarily written in the

headquarters of the military and its intelligence agencies. This continuous tension between the ballot box and the barracks forms the central dilemma of Pakistan's political identity, a schism that has prevented the consolidation of genuine democratic rule despite formal adherence to some of its processes (Shah, 2022).

This paradoxical system is best understood as a "hybrid democracy," a regime type that strategically blends democratic facades with authoritarian core elements. Scholars like Levitsky and Way (2010) conceptualize such systems as "competitive authoritarianism," where democratic institutions exist and provide a veneer of legitimacy but are systematically manipulated by incumbent powers. In the Pakistani context, this hybridity is not a temporary aberration but a deeply entrenched, institutionalized form of governance. It features a nominal commitment to constitutionalism, periodic multiparty elections, and a functioning, albeit often muzzled, civil society. Yet, these democratic features are consistently undermined by the overbearing influence of the military establishment, which exercises veto power over critical policy domains particularly foreign affairs, national security, and internal political engineering through both overt and covert means (Siddiqi, 2021). The result is a dual state: a visible, constitutional state managed by civilians and an invisible, deep state controlled by the military, which ultimately holds the reins of power.

It is within this framework that this article posits its central argument: the hybrid democratic model in Pakistan, characterized by the enduring power of the military establishment, poses a fundamental and systemic challenge to the sovereignty of the people, as enshrined in the country's constitution. The preamble of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) unequivocally states that "the State shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen representatives of the people." However, the operational reality of hybrid governance directly subverts this principle. When a military establishment can orchestrate the rise and fall of political parties, manipulate electoral outcomes, and dictate national policy without being subject to public accountability, the very concept of the people as the ultimate source of sovereign power becomes a legal fiction. This article will trace the historical roots of this hybridity, analyze its contemporary mechanisms from political engineering to judicial coercion and demonstrate how this system creates a perpetual "sovereignty deficit," rendering the will of the electorate secondary to the interests of an unelected oligarchy (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Literature Review

The theoretical underpinnings of this analysis are rooted in the scholarship on regime types that defy simple binary classification. Foundational theories of democratic transition and consolidation, as articulated by Linz and Stepan (1996), posit a clear pathway whereby states move from authoritarianism through a transitional phase to a consolidated democracy, characterized by the absence of "reserved domains" of power for the military. However, Pakistan's persistent oscillation between overt martial law and quasi-civilian rule challenges this linear model, suggesting a state of arrested development. To decipher this, the concepts of "hybrid regimes" and "competitive authoritarianism" become indispensable. Levitsky and Way (2010) define competitive authoritarianism as systems where formal democratic institutions exist and are viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but where incumbents routinely violate democratic norms so severely that the playing field is heavily skewed. This framework is highly applicable, yet the Pakistani case exhibits a unique characteristic: the primary actor manipulating the playing field is often not the civilian incumbent but a permanent military establishment operating from both within and outside the state apparatus. This aligns with the older, yet still relevant, concept of the "praetorian state," where the military asserts itself as the ultimate arbiter of national politics, considering itself the guardian of the state's ideological and territorial integrity (Huntington, 1968; Perlmutter, 1974). These theoretical lenses provide a crucial foundation for moving beyond the simplistic "democracy vs. dictatorship" dichotomy

and for analyzing the institutionalized, yet fluid, power-sharing arrangement that defines modern Pakistan.

The historical literature on Pakistan unequivocally charts the military's evolution from a state institution to the state's central political and economic core. Scholarly works meticulously document the foundational coups of 1958, 1977, and 1999, which established a precedent of direct military rule (Jalal, 1995; Rizvi, 2000). However, contemporary scholarship has shifted focus from these overt interventions to the military's sophisticated entrenchment during interstitial civilian periods. Ayesha Siddiq's seminal work, *Military Inc.* (2017), provides a groundbreaking analysis of the military's expansive economic empire, detailing its penetration into vast commercial ventures from real estate and manufacturing to banking and infrastructure. This "milbus" (military business) creates a powerful, self-sustaining economic interest in maintaining political control, ensuring that even elected governments are constrained by the military's corporate welfare. This economic hegemony is complemented by its institutional dominance over national security and foreign policy, a dynamic that persists regardless of the civilian government in power (Fair, 2021). As a result, the military is not merely a political actor but a "parent organization" that has successfully subordinated other state institutions to its will, creating a persistent structural imbalance that no single election can rectify (Zaidi, 2021). This historical and institutional analysis reveals that the current hybridity is not an anomaly but the matured form of a decades-long project of military supremacy.

At its normative core, the concept of popular sovereignty, as derived from Rousseau and enshrined in modern democratic constitutions, posits that the ultimate authority and source of political power resides with the people. This principle is actualized through specific, non-negotiable prerequisites. As articulated by Dahl (1998), polyarchy requires not only free and fair elections but also inclusive citizenship, the right to expression, access to alternative information, and the ability of elected officials to exercise control over policy without being subservient to unelected bodies. The very essence of this sovereignty is violated when a *pouvoir constitué* (a constituted power, like the military) effectively supersedes the *pouvoir constituant* (the constituent power, the people). Scholars like Philip (2021) argue that for sovereignty to be meaningful, it must be "unbundled" from mere territorial control and understood as the people's capacity for effective self-governance. This capacity is eviscerated when the fundamental condition of civilian control over the military a cornerstone of democratic theory is absent. The literature is clear: without this control, elections become a ritualistic exercise rather than a genuine transfer of power, and the sovereignty of the people remains a hollow legal fiction.

Synthesizing these three bodies of literature theoretical frameworks on hybridity, historical analyses of Pakistan's civil-military dynamics, and the normative principles of sovereignty reveals a critical gap in the existing scholarship. While numerous excellent studies have documented the military's political role (Siddiq, 2017; Rizvi, 2000), and others have analyzed Pakistan's system through the lens of competitive authoritarianism (Shah, 2022), there remains a need to explicitly and systematically tether the mechanics of Pakistan's hybrid regime to the specific and systematic erosion of *popular sovereignty* as a normative and operational principle. Much of the literature treats the military's influence as a problem of governance or political stability. This article, however, argues that the issue is more fundamental: it is a crisis of constitutional legitimacy and popular will. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by contending that the hybrid nature of Pakistan's democracy is not merely a descriptor of its political system but is the very mechanism through which the sovereignty of the people is continuously neutralized. It will demonstrate that the tools of hybrid governance political engineering, judicial co-option, and media manipulation are not just tactics of power retention but are direct assaults on the foundational tenet of democratic self-rule.

Research Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of the hybrid political system in Pakistan.
2. To identify and analyze the contemporary tools and methods used by unelected institutions to maintain political influence.
3. To critically assess the impact of this hybridity on key pillars of popular sovereignty: free elections, accountable governance, and civilian supremacy.
4. To provide a critical analysis of the prospects for genuine democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What are the historical and institutional factors that have sustained the hybrid democratic model in Pakistan?
2. What are the key mechanisms (e.g., political engineering, judicial influence, media control) through which unelected institutions exert power in the contemporary era?
3. What are the tangible consequences of this power dynamic for electoral integrity, parliamentary supremacy, and public trust in democratic processes?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research design to deconstruct the intricate power dynamics of Pakistan's hybrid democracy and its consequent challenge to popular sovereignty. The non-linear and deeply institutionalized nature of this phenomenon makes a qualitative approach most appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of context, processes, and meanings that quantitative data alone cannot capture. The primary mode of inquiry is desk-based research, systematically leveraging a wide spectrum of secondary sources to build a multi-layered evidentiary base. This foundation is constructed from rigorous academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles that provide the theoretical and historical grounding in civil-military relations and democratic theory. To anchor the analysis in contemporary realities, this scholarly work is supplemented by reports from internationally recognized monitoring bodies such as Freedom House and the International Crisis Group, which offer expert assessments of democratic health and political stability. Furthermore, to trace the real-time manifestations of hybridity, the research incorporates critical analysis from reputable national and international news media, providing a chronicle of ongoing political events, electoral processes, and institutional conflicts.

The analytical process is guided by a dual approach of thematic and content analysis, applied systematically to the collected corpus of data. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data that directly speak to the mechanisms of hybrid governance. This involves coding the material for recurring concepts such as "political engineering," "judicial co-option," "media manipulation," and "economic coercion," allowing for a structured understanding of how military influence is exercised beyond the blunt instrument of a coup. Concurrently, content analysis is employed to objectively examine the substance of key documents, such as the Constitution of Pakistan, judicial rulings on pivotal political cases, and the language used in official military communiqués. By scrutinizing this content, the research can identify discernible patterns and biases that reveal the underlying power structure and its discursive justifications. The synthesis of these two analytical methods enables a robust investigation that moves beyond mere description to a critical examination of how the documented patterns of influence and manipulation collectively erode the foundational norms of democratic sovereignty, thereby providing a coherent explanation for the systemic subversion of the people's will.

Genesis of Hybridity in Pakistan

The genesis of Pakistan's hybrid democracy is inextricably linked to its traumatic birth, which forged a "security state" paradigm from its very inception. Born out of the communal violence

of Partition and immediately embroiled in a territorial conflict with India over Kashmir, the nascent Pakistani state operated under a perpetual siege mentality. This existential anxiety privileged the military and bureaucratic institutions as the primary guarantors of the nation's survival, marginalizing the political process and framing national identity around external threat perception (Nawaz, 2021). This foundational imbalance was exacerbated by the untimely death of its founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and the assassination of its first Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, creating a vacuum of legitimate political leadership that the civilian bureaucracy and military apparatus were quick to fill. Consequently, the state's institutional architecture was built not on the bedrock of popular sovereignty and robust parliamentary traditions, but on the imperative of centralized control for national cohesion and defense. This early structural primacy of the security establishment over political development created a path dependency, establishing a precedent where the military viewed itself not as a subordinate institution to civilian authority, but as the ultimate custodian of the national interest, a self-appointed role that would justify its repeated forays into political governance (A. Shah, 2022). This foundational instability culminated in the first direct military intervention in 1958, led by General Ayub Khan, which formally institutionalized the military's political dominance and set a template for future rule. Ayub's decade-long dictatorship (1958-1969) was not merely a suspension of democracy but a concerted effort to create a top-down, politically sterile system of "basic democracies" designed to administer control rather than foster genuine political participation. This model was brutally refined under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977-1988), which fused military authority with a particular brand of political Islam to legitimize its rule, systematically Islamizing the legal and educational systems to create a new ideological bedrock for the state (H. Haqqani, 2022). Zia's era was pivotal in deepening the military's institutional and economic entrenchment, a process further advanced by General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), who combined a rhetoric of "enlightened moderation" with the pervasive use of intelligence agencies to manage the political landscape. Each of these prolonged dictatorships did more than just interrupt civilian rule; they actively dismantled and reconfigured political parties, co-opted the judiciary, and nurtured a pliant class of politicians, ensuring that even after their formal departure, the political ecosystem remained fundamentally conditioned to operate within boundaries set by the military establishment.

The transitions following these dictatorships were, therefore, not restorations of unfettered democracy but carefully "managed" processes designed to preserve the military's core interests behind a civilian facade. The post-Zia era saw the creation of a troika system where power was shared between the President, the Prime Minister, and the Army Chief, ensuring the military retained a formal veto. The post-Musharraf era, beginning in 2008, represented a more sophisticated evolution of this hybridity. Here, the military largely retreated from the *day-to-day* operations of governance but retained overwhelming influence over "high politics" foreign policy, national security, and nuclear command while also perfecting the tools of "political engineering" to ensure pliable civilian governments (International Crisis Group, 2023). This involves the strategic use of coercion, patronage, and legal manipulation to sideline recalcitrant political actors and elevate cooperative ones, a process starkly evident in the overt pressure on governments and the alleged manipulation of party loyalties through establishment-backed operations. These managed transitions have created a cyclical pattern where civilian governments are allowed to govern, but not to rule truly, ensuring that the sovereignty of the people, while ritually invoked during elections, is systematically neutered in the corridors of real power.

Pillars of Pakistan's Contemporary Hybrid Regime

The most visible pillar of Pakistan's contemporary hybrid regime is its sophisticated apparatus for political engineering, which operates to ensure that the electoral process yields manageable outcomes rather than unfettered popular will. This goes beyond historical coup-making to a

more nuanced strategy of shaping the political landscape itself. The establishment, primarily through its intelligence agencies, employs a dual strategy of coercion and co-option to sideline political actors deemed threatening to its interests while fostering and elevating pliable alternatives. This was starkly demonstrated ahead of the 2018 general elections, where allegations of "pre-poll rigging" were widespread, involving the legal disqualification and imprisonment of key political figures like Nawaz Sharif on charges his supporters decried as politically motivated, while simultaneously encouraging defections from mainstream parties to create a more favorable electoral field for a preferred candidate (International Crisis Group, 2019). More recently, the pressure on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party following the events of May 9, 2023, including the alleged forced resignations of party members and the creation of a new, establishment-sanctioned faction, represents a textbook case of deconstructing a major political party to neutralize its influence (BBC News, 2023). This continuous management ensures that no civilian government can claim an unassailable mandate, thereby remaining dependent on the military's tacit or explicit support for its survival. This political manipulation is legally sanctified through a second, critical pillar: the constitutional and judicial interface. The superior judiciary, while occasionally asserting its independence, has a documented history of providing legal cover for military interventions through the controversial "doctrine of necessity," thereby legitimizing coups post-facto. In the contemporary era, this influence is exercised more subtly through the perceived politicization of key judgments that align with the establishment's political engineering goals. The 2017 disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by the Supreme Court in the Panama Papers case was widely interpreted not merely as an act of judicial accountability but as a pivotal move that actively disrupted a civilian government and altered the political trajectory of the country (H. Shah, 2022). Furthermore, influence over judicial appointments, particularly through bodies like the Judicial Commission of Pakistan, remains a subject of intense debate, with critics arguing it ensures a bench that is often sympathetic to the state's security narrative. This judicial complicity, whether coerced or voluntary, provides a veneer of constitutional legitimacy to processes that fundamentally undermine democratic sovereignty, blurring the lines between legal adjudication and political execution.

To control the public narrative that surrounds this engineered political and legal landscape, the regime relies on a robust media management unit. This pillar operates through a calculated mix of coercion and co-option, ensuring that dominant media narratives align with the establishment's interests. Coercive tactics include direct censorship, the enforced disappearance of vocal journalists, and indirect pressure through the manipulation of advertising revenues—a vital lifeline for media houses. Media regulators, such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), are frequently used to issue bans on specific topics or to silence critical voices under the guise of maintaining "national security" or "public order" (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Simultaneously, co-option is achieved by cultivating a cadre of "patriotic" journalists and analysts who reliably promote the desired narrative, often receiving privileged access to information and officials. This creates a chilling effect and an environment of self-censorship, where the boundaries of permissible discourse are narrowly defined by the military's public relations wing, effectively manufacturing consent for the hybrid regime and marginalizing dissent as unpatriotic or a threat to the state.

Underpinning all other pillars is the military's vast, entrenched economic empire, which creates a powerful, material vested interest in maintaining the political status quo. Documented extensively by Ayesha Siddiqi as "Milbus," this empire encompasses a sprawling network of commercial interests, including but not limited to, massive real estate developments (e.g., DHA and Bahria Town), complex industrial holdings in sectors like cement, fertilizers, and banking, and extensive infrastructure contracts (Siddiqi, 2021). This economic hegemony serves two crucial functions. First, it provides immense off-budget revenue streams that enhance the

military's institutional autonomy from civilian financial oversight, making it a state within a state. Second, it creates a powerful corporate lobby within the military that has a direct stake in political stability as defined by the continuation of its privileged access to resources and policy-making. Any move toward genuine civilian supremacy, with its attendant demands for accountability and transparency, would directly threaten these vast financial interests. Therefore, the economic empire is not a byproduct of the military's political power; it is a fundamental cause of its enduring involvement in politics, ensuring that the preservation of its corporate welfare is inextricably linked to the maintenance of a hybrid system where it retains ultimate veto power.

Sovereignty Deficit in Pakistan

The most glaring manifestation of the sovereignty deficit is the transformation of elections from an expression of popular will into a sophisticated instrument of political management. This process involves extensive pre- and post-poll engineering that systematically negates genuine voter choice. Pre-poll tactics include the legal and extra-legal disqualification of threatening candidates, the creation of political factions favorable to the establishment, and a pervasive environment where media narratives and campaign resources are strategically manipulated to skew the playing field. The 2018 general elections were widely criticized by observers for such "pre-poll rigging," where one party was seen to contest the election on a highly uneven footing (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018). More recently, the political crackdown following the May 2023 unrest, involving mass arrests of party workers and the systematic dismantling of a major political party through pressure and defections, constitutes a profound pre-poll manipulation aimed at shaping the outcome of future elections before a single vote is cast (Hashim, 2023). This engineering ensures that the act of voting is reduced to a ritual that endorses a pre-ordained political order, stripping the electorate of its sovereign power to effect meaningful change through the ballot box and rendering the parliament a body of managed, rather than mandated, representatives.

This managed electoral process naturally produces a subservient parliament, which in turn is prevented from exercising sovereignty over the state's most critical policy domains. While legislatures in mature democracies hold absolute authority over national policy, Pakistan's parliament operates under the explicit and implicit veto of the military establishment. Foundational issues of national security, foreign policy especially relations with the United States, China, and India and command and control over the nuclear arsenal remain firmly within the military's exclusive purview, effectively creating a state within a state. As scholar C. Christine Fair (2021) notes, the military's dominance in these areas is so normalized that civilian governments are often mere bystanders in pivotal national decisions. For instance, major diplomatic initiatives or confrontations with neighboring countries are frequently conducted by the military's public relations wing or its intelligence agencies, with parliament relegated to a post-facto debating society. This structural emasculation of the legislature means that even if a government were to attain a genuine mandate, its capacity to govern sovereignly is constitutionally and practically circumscribed, creating an unbridgeable chasm between legal authority and de facto power.

The cumulative effect of this systemic manipulation is a catastrophic erosion of public trust and a deepening chasm between constitutional ideals and operational reality. The repeated cycle of engineered elections and hamstrung governments has bred profound voter apathy and cynicism, as citizens increasingly view the democratic process as a charade orchestrated by powerful, unelected forces. This disillusionment is not merely anecdotal; it is reflected in declining voter turnout in manipulated constituencies and growing public discourse that questions the utility of electoral participation altogether. This creates a vicious cycle: public disengagement provides the establishment with further justification to manage the political landscape, arguing that politicians are corrupt and public opinion is fractious. Consequently,

the grand promise of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) that “the State shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen representatives of the people” becomes a hollow proclamation. The sovereignty vested in the people by the supreme legal document is systematically neutralized by the extra-constitutional authority of the military establishment, revealing a fundamental truth: Pakistan operates under a dual system of constitutional sovereignty for legitimacy and de facto military control for governance, a contradiction that lies at the very heart of its ongoing political crisis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the hybrid democratic model in Pakistan is not a transient phase but a deeply entrenched and sophisticated system of governance designed to systematically neuter the sovereignty of the people. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that this system operates through a powerful, self-reinforcing architecture. Its pillars the political engineering of electoral outcomes, the judicial sanctification of establishment preferences, the coercive management of public narrative, and the vast economic empire of the military work in concert to create a political reality where the forms of democracy are meticulously preserved while its substance is ruthlessly evacuated. Elections become managed exercises, parliaments are reduced to debating societies on peripheral issues, and the public’s trust erodes into cynical apathy. The result is a profound sovereignty deficit, where the constitutional proclamation that all authority flows from the people becomes a legal fiction, masking the de facto control exercised by an unelected military establishment that considers itself the ultimate arbiter of the national interest.

Therefore, the struggle for Pakistan’s democratic soul is no longer about preventing another military coup, but about dismantling this institutionalized hybridity itself. The central challenge is to achieve a decisive transition from a system of managed civilian administration to one of genuine civilian supremacy, where elected representatives possess unfettered authority over all domains of state policy, including national security and foreign affairs. Without this fundamental rebalancing, the cycle of engineered democracies and stunted political development will persist indefinitely. The path forward demands a collective and courageous project of democratic consolidation: strengthening political parties from within, forging a national consensus on the inviolability of the constitutional order, and emboldening civil society and an independent media to reclaim the public narrative. Ultimately, for Pakistan to realize the promise of its own constitution, the will of the people must be allowed to reign supreme, not merely as a ritual performed every five years, but as the enduring and unchallenged principle guiding the destiny of the nation.

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