

**RESEARCH PAPER****Democratic Consolidation and Party Politics in Pakistan: The Role of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), 2008–2013****¹Javed Iqbal and ²Dr. Sajida Begum**

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Corresponding Author: Iqbal1268@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP) role in Pakistan's democratic consolidation during its 2008–2013 tenure, focusing on constitutional, parliamentary, and civil-military reforms. Following the 2008 elections that ended military rule, the PPP faced weak democratic institutions and governance challenges. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, data were drawn from party manifestos, parliamentary debates, constitutional amendments, and official documents, supplemented by scholarly and policy sources. The 18th Amendment, which devolved powers and restored parliamentary supremacy, marked a major democratic milestone. The PPP also completed the first full civilian term, enabling peaceful power transfer. However, governance crises, corruption allegations, energy shortages, and limited economic reform undermined institutional consolidation. While the party ensured democratic continuity, weak accountability and transparency restricted substantive progress. Future consolidation requires linking constitutional reforms with effective governance, public accountability, and improved service delivery to strengthen democratic legitimacy beyond procedural success.

KEYWORDS Democratic Consolidation, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), 18th Amendment, Civil-Military Relations, Parliamentary Governance**Introduction**

The general elections of 2008 marked the history of politics in Pakistan as it signified the death of nearly a decade of military rule by General Pervez Musharraf. Being regarded as comparatively fair and free, the elections were won by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which was made the largest party in the National assembly, with 119 seats out of 342 (Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 2019). This was not only significant in the fact that this was the result of peaceful power transition between military and civilian rule, but it also indicated the electorate was turning out to be more favorable to the democratic rule. The fact that the PPP returned to the country after the military supremacy was considered a decisive step towards the democratic consolidation of the country that had been tainted with authoritarian interventions.

The leadership of the PPP during this time and especially under the leadership of president Asif Ali Zardari and prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani have played a very important part in steering the turbulent democratic situation. The enactment of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 2010 was one of the most outstanding accomplishments of the PPP led government. The amendment greatly limited presidential powers, especially Article 58(2)(b) which was a contentious one as it had been previously applied by the military regimes to overturn elected governments (Khan, Ullah, & Khan, 2021). The amendment also gave significant administrative and fiscal power to the provinces which dealt with long-standing provincial concerns on centralized government and strengthened federalism as a democratic value (Crisis Group, 2013).

The PPP successfully served a five-year term, an unprecedented situation in the history of elected governments in Pakistan, despite many issues such as poor economy, increasing militancy, and institutional opposition by the military and judiciary (Chaudhary, 2013). Such continuity was critical to democratic consolidation because it left a legacy that future civilian regimes would work within constitutional boundaries and finish their term. The political conciliation aspect of the PPP, specifically through its real alliances with its opponents, such as Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) were also a factor that enabled the political process to be less antagonistic and cooperative (Yaseen, et. al., 2021; Gohar et al., 2022).

Besides the institutional reforms, the PPP contained a number of social and economic policies that were directed to the inclusive government. In 2008, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) was initiated to create one of the largest social assistance initiatives in the Pakistani history with the purpose of eradicating poverty and empowering women (Dawn, 2024). The other indication of gender-representation in politics was the party that introduced a first-women member of the National Assembly as a Speaker, Fehmida Mirza. Although they were not the specific actions that were not facing criticism, they were incorporated in the overall agenda of democratizing the state institutions and social equity that the PPP advocated.

The democratic consolidation of Pakistan was anchored on the PPP rule between the year 2008 and 2013. The expiry of the term of a shaky democratic government, introduction of significant constitutional changes and by inter-party co-operation, was achieved by the PPP in stabilizing the regime. Challenges notwithstanding, it was a tremendous sign of change as compared to the cycles of military intervention and political instability that had characterized the political life of Pakistan in the past.

Literature Review

The conceptual toolbox of democratic consolidation could be used to analyze the post-2008 Pakistani course. The classical model of democracy, which was formulated by Linz and Stepan (1996) that democracy is consolidated when it is the only game in town, is still the starting point. Their three behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional aspects, which are supplemented by the five arenas (civil society, political society, rule of law, usable bureaucracy and economic society) give a comprehensive yardstick upon which weak regimes can be evaluated (Uppsala University, 2019). Huntington's (1991) parsimonious "two-turnover" rule is frequently invoked as a minimal indicator, yet scholars warn that alternation in power without institutional deepening may simply produce electoral "rotations" rather than consolidation (Malik, 2014). Consequently, recent work privileges the quality of civilian control over the coercive apparatus, the insulation of courts and oversight agencies, and the embedding of norms that make coup-making prohibitively costly (Bermeo, 2016).

Within this broader debate, political parties are increasingly viewed not merely as electoral vehicles but as gatekeepers of democratic norms. Mainwaring (1999) argues that parties institutionalise uncertainty by persuading elites to compete within constitutional parameters; without such "loyal competition", elected governments remain vulnerable to praetorian intervention. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) extend the argument, demonstrating that informal norms of mutual toleration and forbearance are enforced through dense partisan networks; when parties fragment or become clientelistic, these guardrails erode. In Pakistan's context, where the military has repeatedly dissolved legislatures, the capacity of parties to forge inter-elite pacts and complete constitutional terms is therefore treated as a key indicator of consolidation (Mufti, et. Al., 2020; Fareed, et. al., 2019; Jathol, et. al., 2024).

Empirical studies of Pakistan after 2008 increasingly adopt this party-centred lens. Malik (2014) interprets the PPP-led coalition's survival until 2013 as evidence that "elite

learning” had occurred: rather than inviting military arbitration, the PPP and PML-N negotiated repeated crises through parliamentary committees and judicial referral. The 18th Amendment, which stripped the presidency of dissolution powers and devolved 17 ministries to the provinces, is coded by Chaudhary (2013) as a “constitutional pact” that reduced the stakes of federal competition and thereby lowered the military’s self-justification for intervention. Gohar et al., on the other hand, emphasise the inner centralisation of the PPP and the use of the Sindh card as the reasons why the diffusion of norms across parties became weak, as an example that organisational pathologies can counteract system-level advantages. Mohmand (2019) introduces an additional distributive element by demonstrating that the Benazir Income Support Programme established a pro-poor constituency that amplified the electoral mobilisation, which made it more expensive to undo authoritarianism thus supporting consolidation at the bottom.

Taken together, the literature converges on two insights. First, democratic consolidation in post-2008 Pakistan is best understood as an iterative process in which parties negotiate rules of co-existence while simultaneously contesting power. Second, formal constitutional engineering must be accompanied by informal norm reinforcement inside parties; without intra-party democracy and coalition forbearance, institutional reforms remain brittle. The PPP’s 2008-2013 tenure therefore offers a crucial within-case episode to examine how civilian actors translate electoral mandates into self-enforcing constraints on the military-technocratic complex.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has functioned as both a movement and a party since its founding by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967, positioning “roti, kapra, makan” at the centre of a populist coalition that mobilised urban workers, rural tenants and marginalised provinces against military-bureaucratic dominance (Rizvi, 2019). Bhutto’s 1973 Constitution entrenched parliamentary supremacy and federal recognition of ethno-linguistic identities, institutional templates that subsequent generals could not fully dismantle. After Bhutto’s judicial execution in 1979, his daughter Benazir Bhutto inherited the charisma of martyrdom, converting the PPP into the primary electoral vehicle against Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamising regime; the party’s 1988, 1993 and 2008 victories are routinely cited as critical moments when civilian rule was restored through mass mobilisation and elite pacts (Mufti, Shafqat & Siddiqui, 2020). Between 1988 and 1999 the PPP survived two dismissals under Article 58(2)(b), yet each termination deepened the party’s organisational dependence on the Bhutto family and provincial patronage networks, a legacy that shaped its strategic calculus after 2008 (Malik, 2014).

Regardless of this *longue-durée* importance, however, there has been an empirical hiatus in the literature: not a single monograph or peer reviewed article isolates the 2008-2013 period and isolates it to ask how the PPP converted historical legitimacy into day to day governance in a manner geared towards democratic consolidation. Party-centric explanations end with the assassination of Benazir in 2007 (Rizvi, 2019) or include the Zardari-Gilani government in the wider category of surveys of civilian-military relationships (Gohar et al., 2022). Therefore, less significant processes like the negotiation of the 18 th Amendment, a four-party coalition management, and the application of social protection policy to increase pro-democratic constituencies remain theoretically unexplained. It is critical to close this gap in order to identify whether the fifth term of the PPP is a consolidation inflection or another continuing cycle of electoral restoration.

The qualitative, descriptive and analytical study approach is used to question the role of the repertoire of governance of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) 2008- 2013 in facilitating or delaying democratic consolidation. The qualitative inquiry is justified by the fact that the phenomenon of interest, elite norm-formation, institutional bargaining, and symbolic legitimation, cannot be effectively described in the quantitative proxies (Bryman, 2016). A descriptive lens will rebuild the chronology of major choices, whereas an analytical

mode will follow causal connections between the party strategic choices and democratic results found in the theoretical literature.

The main sources include party manifestos (PPP, 2008), policy white papers, presidential ordinances, the work of the National Assembly and Senate debates (2008-2013), the text of the 18th and 20th Amendments, and the minutes of the cabinet meetings, which are available in the online repository of the Cabinet Division (2009). The presence of comparative logic entails in a constant contrasting of PPP practices with the democratic standards provided by the consolidation framework as is provided by Linz and Stepan (1996) as follows: conformity to constitutionalism, integrity of elections, and civilian pre-eminence and preservation of associational rights.

The analytical matrix is operationalised to take seven indicators of political-development that include: (1) constitutional reforms (scope and implementation of the 18th Amendment); (2) federalism (provincial autonomy and NFC Award); (3) electoral process (by-election conduct, ECP independence); (4) civil-military relations (defence budget scrutiny, ISI political role); (5) judiciary (appointment mechanism, judicial activism); (6) media (PEMRA ordinances, journalist harassment incidents); and (7) human All of the indicators are rated on a three-point ordinal scale, process-tracing both within and across arenas, on whether the PPP would carry electoral legitimacy into self-reinforcing democratic drawbacks (George and Bennett, 2005).

Results and Discussion

Between 2008 and 2013 the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) converted its razor-thin plurality into a series of structural reforms that collectively lowered the probability of authoritarian reversal. The most emblematic initiative, the 18th Constitutional Amendment, passed unanimously in April 2010, repealed the president's power to dissolve parliament under Article 58(2)(b), transferred thirty-three federal subjects to the provinces, and enshrined a new appointment mechanism for superior judges that diluted executive discretion (Chaudhary, 2013). By reducing the "stakes" of federal competition, the reform satisfied Linz & Stepan's (1996) behavioural criterion that no significant actor attempts to overthrow the democratic regime; even the PML-N, historically sceptical of decentralisation, voted for the bill, signalling cross-party acceptance of parliamentary supremacy. Table 1 summarises the key provisions and their consolidation payoff.

Table 1
Eighteenth Amendment at a Glance (selected clauses)

Article affected	Pre-amendment power	Post-amendment change	Consolidation effect
58(2)(b)	President dissolves NA	Clause deleted	Coup mechanism removed
61 & 62	Vague "Islamic" qualifications	Precise eligibility criteria	Electoral integrity
153A-160	Centre controls health, education	Concurrent list abolished	Provincial autonomy
175A	Executive appoints judges	Parliamentary committee + JC	Judicial independence

Completion of a full five-year term in March 2013 constituted the second major contribution. No elected government had ever survived a complete parliamentary cycle; previous assemblies were terminated by presidential firings (1988, 1990, 1993, 1996) or military coups (1958, 1977, 1999). The PPP achieved continuity through a pragmatic "policy of reconciliation" that sequentially co-opted the MQM, the PML-Q and finally the PML-N into legislative coalitions, thereby depriving the military of a unified civilian demand for arbitration (Gohar et al., 2022). Huntington's (1991) "two-turnover" test was thus preemptively satisfied: when the PPP lost the 2013 elections it accepted defeat, and the PML-N formed government without institutional subterfuge, demonstrating that electoral rules had become self-enforcing.

Parliamentary supremacy was further buttressed by institutionalising budget oversight. The 20th Amendment (2012) transferred the appointment of caretaker prime ministers to a bipartisan parliamentary committee, while the Public Accounts Committee was chaired, for the first time, by an opposition MNA—Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan—signalling that the treasury accepted horizontal accountability (Khan, Ullah & Khan, 2021). These procedural reforms elevated the National Assembly's prestige vis-à-vis both the presidency and the military's financial autonomy.

Finally, the PPP quietly renegotiated civil-military relations without provoking a praetorian backlash. The government retained the defence budget as a single line-item but created a Parliamentary Committee on National Security that received classified briefings, thereby piercing the military's information monopoly (Crisis Group, 2013). By supporting General Kayani's extension in 2010 while simultaneously extending the Chief Justice's tenure, Zardari signalled acceptance of army professionalism in exchange for judicial oversight of military land transfers—an implicit bargain that kept the barracks neutral during Memogate and other crises (Malik, 2014). Although the military retained its “red lines” on India and nuclear policy, the absence of overt intervention between 2008 and 2013 suggests that the PPP's incremental strategy marginally increased civilian bargaining power.

Despite its institutional achievements, the PPP's tenure was simultaneously undercut by governance deficits that provided ammunition to anti-democratic forces. Transparency International Pakistan (2012) ranked Pakistan 139th out of 176 states on its Corruption Perceptions Index, citing the “rent-seeking culture” surrounding rental-power projects approved by the Ministry of Water & Power. The National Accountability Bureau registered 42 cases against PPP ministers for misappropriation of public funds, including the high-profile Hajj corruption scandal that forced the resignation of Religious Affairs Minister Hamid Saeed Kazmi (Malik, 2014). Such episodes reinforced public cynicism and allowed the military to re-enter politics under the moral guise of “clean-up”, thereby eroding the normative legitimacy essential for consolidation (Bermeo, 2016).

Security challenges further exposed the limits of civilian capacity. The army's 2009 Swat operation displaced two million persons, yet the PPP-led cabinet ceded operational control to GHQ, accepting a subservient role in counter-terrorism strategy. Between 2008 and 2013 more than 15,000 terrorist attacks killed 35,000 civilians (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2014). The government's inability to protect citizens undermined the state's monopoly of violence—a core arena in Linz & Stepan's (1996) framework—and validated military assertions that “security trumps democracy” (Crisis Group, 2013).

Economically, the PPP inherited a balance-of-payments crisis but postponed structural reforms. Circular debt in the energy sector ballooned from PKR 161 billion in 2008 to PKR 872 billion by March 2013, while GDP growth averaged only 2.9 % (World Bank, 2014). The IMF's 2008 Stand-By Arrangement was suspended twice because the finance team failed to implement GST widening or privatise loss-making public enterprises. Table 2 contrasts promised versus realised reforms.

Table 2
Economic Reform Promises vs. Outcomes (2008-2013)

Policy area	Manifesto pledge	2013 outcome	Consolidation impact
Privatisation	Sell 20 SOEs	0 sales completed	Fiscal stress persists
Tax/GDP ratio	Raise to 15 %	Stagnant at 9 %	Weak revenue bargain
Circular debt	Eliminate in 2 yrs	Tripled	Energy riots, unrest

Consequently, while the PPP embedded procedural democracy, its failure to deliver public goods left an “accountability vacuum” that populist challengers exploited in the 2013 campaign.

Overall, the Pakistan Peoples Party's 2008-2013 tenure constitutes a paradoxical episode in Pakistan's political evolution: it entrenched core procedural rules of the democratic game while exhibiting conspicuous deficits in policy performance that ultimately limited the depth of consolidation. On the positive ledger, the PPP satisfied the "behavioural" and "constitutional" thresholds identified by Linz & Stepan (1996): no major actor attempted to derail the electoral calendar, the 18th and 20th amendments reduced presidential prerogatives, and the first-ever civilian transfer of power after a full parliamentary term signalled that electoral defeat had become a routine rather than existential risk (Malik, 2014). These achievements shifted Pakistan from a "transition" to an "unconsolidated democracy" by lowering the likelihood of overt military intervention.

Yet consolidation also demands governmental effectiveness—what Schedler (2001) labels the "institutional depth" that links procedural legitimacy to policy outputs. Here the balance-sheet is negative. As Table 3 summarises, the PPP scored high on rule-of-law reforms but low on service-delivery indicators, generating what Bermeo (2016) terms "performance-based disaffection" that populist challengers later channelled into anti-system rhetoric. Corruption scandals and energy shortages became ammunition for the military's indirect intervention during the 2014 PTI dharna, illustrating that democratic continuity can coexist with eroding public legitimacy.

Table 3
Democratic Consolidation Scorecard, PPP 2008-2013

Arena	Indicator	Score (1-5)	Evidence
Political society	Electoral alternation	5	Peaceful 2013 transfer
Rule of law	18th Amendment	5	Judicial appointment reform
Economic society	Energy crisis management	2	Circular debt tripled
Civil-military	Defence oversight	3	Parliamentary committee created but budget opaque
Public goods	Corruption perception	2	TI rank 139/176

Consequently, the PPP's legacy is best characterised as "procedural consolidation without performance legitimacy." While it lengthened democratic time-horizons for elites, its failure to translate procedural gains into tangible improvements in security, energy and accountability left the system vulnerable to populist and praetorian rebound. Future research should therefore disaggregate consolidation into its procedural and performance dimensions to avoid conflating electoral endurance with sustainable liberal democracy.

Conclusion

Between 2008 and 2013 the Pakistan Peoples Party translated decades of populist mobilisation into a series of structural reforms that moved Pakistan from intermittent authoritarianism to the threshold of democratic consolidation. By engineering the 18th Amendment, institutionalising the National Finance Commission Award, and shepherding the first civilian hand-over through the ballot box, the PPP satisfied the procedural and constitutional criteria advanced by Linz & Stepan (1996): electoral rules became the "only game in town" for elites, while provinces acquired fiscal and legislative autonomy that lowered the stakes of federal contestation. These historic developments extended democratic time-horizons and provided self-imposing limitations to presidential or military overthrows in the future.

The absence of governance due to scandals of corruption and energy shortages and inability to monopolise violence by the government demonstrated a case of lack of governance that mitigated popular legitimacy and became the subject of populist and judicial revenge. Therefore, the period before 2008-2013 was not really a period of consolidation as much as of critical juncture: it naturalised electoral alternation and parliamentary supremacy as well as showed that sustainable liberal democracy must be accompanied by constitutional engineering and efficient service delivery. One should

recognize this dual inheritance among the scholars and policymakers who desire to unravel the mystery as to why the democracy path in Pakistan was evolving without experiencing a total transformation during the PPP rule.

Recommendations

- Strengthening political party institutionalization to reduce reliance on personalities.
- Improving governance, transparency, and accountability mechanisms.
- Enhancing party capacity for policy formulation and implementation.
- Promoting intra-party democracy for long-term democratic consolidation.
- Building resilience against authoritarian reversals through strong civil institutions.

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