



Role of Pakistan's Establishment in Politics

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ABSTRACT

The political history of Pakistan has been profoundly impacted by the country's "establishment," a term used for the powerful military and intelligence superstructure which has ruled and governed Pakistan. This article attempts to analyze the role of the establishment in Pakistan politics with special focus on its history, methods of interventions and impacts, and influence on democracy. Furthermore, Pakistan has suffered from the phenomenon of political instability or chronic instability for a very long period of time. This started from the military's frequent interference in politics, taking the form of direct coups like those by Ayub Khan in 1958, Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 and Pervez Musharraf in 1999, or indirect control behind the puppet civilian governments.

His major areas of influence include: policy induction such as his kingmaker function during political tent elections, domestic and foreign security policies, controlling cabinet appointments, amendments and foreign interference, clear military sponsored media advertisement, and cut throat techniques by military owned industries.

Role of Pakistan establishment in politics

In Pakistan, the term "establishment" denotes the powerful military and intelligence apparatus which has, historically, dominated the country's politics. Contrary to a number of democracies where elected governments enjoy ultimate power, Pakistan has been, and continues to be, impacted heavily by the establishment influence. This influence take the form of direct military dictatorship, covert. Control, as well as direct intervention on the formulation of international relations, and domestic policies ^[1] To fully comprehend the establishment's role in Pakistan's politics, an analysis of its historical interventions, the relation with civilian governments as well as the impact on democracy in the country is necessary.

Historical Background: The Roots of Military Dominance

Political affairs have been the thrust of Pakistan's establishment since the country emerged as a sovereign state in 1947^[2]. The premature demise of Pakistan's founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, alongside the fatal shooting of the inaugural Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, created a leadership void that was swiftly occupied by the military and the bureaucracy. Pakistan endured its first direct military rule in 1958 when General Ayub Khan ousted the civilian government and imposed martial law ^[3]. From this point forward, a recurrent pattern unfolded in which the military positioned itself as the guardian of national stability and advancement.

These developments came in the wake of Ayub Khan's decade-long (1958–1969) rule, only to be succeeded by yet another military coup in 1977 headed by General Zia-ul-Haq. Zia's rule (1977–1988) was marked by Islamization, the repression of political opposition, and pro-American foreign policy during the Soviet-Afghan war ^[4]. The death of Zia in 1988 was followed by a civilian rule which lasted for a decade, albeit under constant military watch.



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General Pervez Musharraf removed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from office in 1999, marking the most recent military coup^[5]. Musharraf remained in power until 2008, when he was pressured by political parties and civil society. Largely, he was forced to resign. Since that time, Pakistan has had what could be described as ‘nominal civilian rule’ but the establishment continues to pull strings within the shadows^[6].

The Establishment’s Mechanisms of Influence

The establishment’s influence in politics does not stop at direct military rule. Even under civilian governments, the military and intelligence services exercised considerable control through some means^[7].

Kingmaker Role

The institution has served as a kingmaker to an underlying extent; granting support or undermining political figures depending on the believed beneficial interest the establishment will have^[8]. For instance, the military’s tacit support for Imran Khan’s PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) during the 2018 general elections was extensively reported, albeit the military denies direct involvement.

Control over Foreign security and military intervention:

Pakistan’s foreign and security policies, encompassing relations with India, Afghanistan, the United States, and the management of militant groups functioning within Pakistan, have remained under the tight control of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other relevant authorities^[9]. The ISI has traditionally shaped domestic policy in a manner to grant legal approval for such governance. For example, the Supreme Court validated both Ayub Khan’s and Pervez Musharraf’s coups under the “doctrine of necessity^[10].”

Media Manipulation

The establishment shapes public perception through its Controlled Media narrative. Journalists and media critical of the military face various forms of intimidation, censorship, and violence^[11]. The Fauji Foundation and the Army Welfare Trust gives the military an economic foothold which allows them to control economic policy as well as resource distribution. Due to the role it has played, there is no doubt that the establishment’s influence has been detrimental to Pakistan’s political and economic progress^[12]. During the period in which it gained independence, Pakistan lost approximately 33 years of direct military rule during the years of 1958-1971, 1977-1988, and then again from 1999-2008. Meaning that almost half its existence was governed by military dictators^[13]. Military regimes are often critiqued for their utter lack of long-term planning tempered with oppressive governance masked under a facade of enforced stability over a prolonged period of time. This warped reasoning allowed them to get away with short-sighted fiscal policies such as Musharraf’s rampant spending in 1999, where he claimed (and was able) to get - on paper unrivalized GDP growth averaging 5.5% alongside crippling debt levels strapping local businesses alongside rising inequality across all classes apart from those at the top echelons of politics and business^[14].

Widespread human rights violations, including the suppression of dissent, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, have been characteristic of military regimes. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reports more than 7,000 cases of enforced disappearances since 2001^[15]. During the Cold War and after 9/11, Pakistan's alignment



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with the United States brought considerable funding to the country. From 2002 to 2018, over \$33 billion in U.S. aid was provided to Pakistan, most benefiting the military. Interventionist policies have compounded political fragmentation; since 1988 no civilian government has completed a full term without severe military pressure termed soft coups or significant hostile interventions from the armed forces^[16]. There has been a consistent pattern of deep-seated animosity and distrust between civilian administrations and Islamabad power brokers cloaked as technocrats. As perceived by many Turkish-style civilian leaders—Zulfikar Ali Bhutto toured civil premiers are epitomes—for claim their pivotal roles in national affairs only to be countered by persistent military activism^[17].

Nawaz Sharif's Ouster In 1999, Nawaz Sharif attempted to relieve General Pervez Musharraf of his duties as Army Chief which ignited a military coup headlined by Musharraf himself—and this officially marked the end of democratic rule.

Imran Khan was thought to have military support when he rose to power in 2018. Relations with the establishment turned sour over time, however, resulting in his removal through a no-confidence motion in 2022. Since then Khan has claimed that the military is responsible for his ouster. To obtain sustainable democratic governance in Pakistan, a balance between civilian and military influence must be achieved^[18]. Curbing the establishment's sway can be reduced by ensuring independence for the judiciary, parliament, and election commission; strengthening oversight on the military's budget and economic activities would help mitigate its dominance^[20]. Civilian governments need to reel in foreign and security policies to guarantee alignment with democratic standards^[19].

Conclusion

The role of the establishment in Pakistan is a prominent characteristic of the nation's historical narrative and governance. Even though the military has historically rationalized its takeovers as needing to restore some level of order for development, their hold has undermined democracy and eroded institutional integrity. Pakistan's progress hinges on creating respect for civilian rule with a limited constitutional military role; only such political culture can enable sustained democracy and socio-economic development critical for its citizens.

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