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Challenges Faced by the Parliament of Pakistan (2008–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the major challenges faced by the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018, a decade marked by democratic transition and institutional continuity. While this era witnessed the restoration of parliamentary sovereignty following the end of military rule, the functioning of Parliament remained constrained by structural, political, and institutional limitations. Drawing on historical context and contemporary developments, the study highlights how long-standing patterns of civil–military imbalance, weak democratic traditions, and political instability continued to shape parliamentary performance. The research identifies key challenges including executive dominance, weak legislative capacity, ineffective committee systems, and the lack of internal democracy within political parties. The persistence of elite control and factionalism further limited representative governance and policy effectiveness. Additionally, issues related to electoral integrity, the role of the Election Commission, and public distrust contributed to weakening parliamentary legitimacy. The study also underscores the impact of external factors such as U.S. involvement, the War on Terror, and regional instability, which reinforced the dominance of non-parliamentary institutions in policymaking. Moreover, internal challenges such as corruption, political polarization, ethnic tensions, and security crises significantly affected parliamentary functioning. The rise of judicial activism and media influence introduced new dynamics of accountability but also contributed to institutional conflicts. Overall, the findings suggest that despite constitutional reforms and democratic continuity, Pakistan’s Parliament during 2008–2018 operated within a hybrid political system where its authority remained limited. The study concludes that strengthening democratic institutions requires not only constitutional reforms but also institutional capacity-building, political maturity, and enhanced public trust.

Key Words, Parliamentary Challenges, Democratic Consolidation, Civil–Military Relations, Institutional Weakness, Political Instability

Introduction

The period from 2008 to 2018 represents a crucial phase in Pakistan’s political development, characterized by the transition from military-led governance to sustained civilian rule. The general elections of 2008 marked the end of nearly a decade of direct military influence under General Pervez Musharraf and initiated a new era of parliamentary democracy. This transition was significant not only because it restored elected institutions but also because it created expectations for strengthening democratic governance and institutional accountability. However, Pakistan’s democratic experience



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has historically been shaped by cycles of instability, which continued to influence parliamentary performance during this decade (Talbot, 2012).

A defining feature of this period was the passage of the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment in 2010, which significantly altered the balance of power within the state. The amendment restored parliamentary supremacy by curtailing presidential powers, enhancing provincial autonomy, and reinforcing the role of the Prime Minister and Parliament. It also removed the controversial Article 58(2)(b), which had allowed presidents to dissolve the National Assembly. While these reforms were widely regarded as a milestone in Pakistan's constitutional history, their practical impact on strengthening Parliament remained limited due to persistent structural constraints (Khan, 2017).

Despite constitutional reforms, the functioning of Parliament was significantly affected by the enduring influence of non-democratic institutions, particularly the military establishment. Civil–military relations continued to shape policymaking, especially in areas such as national security, foreign policy, and counterterrorism. Parliament often remained excluded from critical decision-making processes, highlighting the imbalance between formal authority and actual power. This dynamic reflects the broader pattern of hybrid governance in Pakistan, where democratic institutions coexist with strong extra-parliamentary actors (Shah, 2014).

Another major challenge during this period was the limited institutional capacity of Parliament. Many legislators lacked the technical expertise and research support necessary for effective lawmaking and policy analysis. Parliamentary committees, which are essential for oversight and accountability, often suffered from irregular attendance, lack of resources, and limited enforcement authority. As a result, legislative processes were frequently reactive rather than proactive, undermining the quality of governance and policy outcomes (Waseem, 2012).

Political polarization further weakened parliamentary performance. The rivalry between major political parties, particularly the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (N), often led to disruptions in parliamentary proceedings. Instead of serving as a platform for constructive debate, Parliament became an arena for political confrontation. Coalition politics also introduced compromises that prioritized short-term political interests over long-term institutional development, thereby affecting legislative effectiveness (Jaffrelot, 2015).

In addition to internal challenges, external pressures also played a significant role in shaping parliamentary dynamics. Pakistan's involvement in the War on Terror, regional security challenges, and economic instability influenced national priorities and strengthened executive decision-making. These pressures often sidelined Parliament, as urgent policy decisions were taken outside formal legislative processes. Consequently, Parliament's role in addressing critical national issues remained limited (Riedel, 2011).

Furthermore, the rise of judicial activism and the expansion of electronic media introduced new dimensions to Pakistan's political system. The judiciary increasingly intervened in political and administrative matters, sometimes challenging parliamentary authority in the name of accountability and rule of law. Similarly, media growth enhanced public awareness and transparency but also contributed to political sensationalism and institutional tensions. These developments reshaped the relationship between Parliament and other state institutions, creating both opportunities and challenges for democratic governance (Siddique, 2013).

Literature Review



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Scholars have extensively examined the evolution of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan, particularly focusing on institutional challenges. Talbot (2012) argues that Pakistan's democratic trajectory has been shaped by repeated military interventions and weak civilian institutions. The study highlights that democratic transitions often lacked continuity, limiting institutional stability. It further notes that Parliament remained constrained by external power structures. As a result, democratic consolidation remained incomplete despite periodic elections. This study does not specifically analyze parliamentary performance during 2008–2018. It lacks focus on recent institutional challenges.

Khan (2017) provides a detailed analysis of constitutional development in Pakistan, especially the Eighteenth Amendment. The study highlights that the amendment restored parliamentary sovereignty and strengthened federalism. However, the author argues that constitutional reforms alone could not ensure effective governance. Institutional weaknesses, political interference, and lack of implementation mechanisms continued to limit parliamentary effectiveness. Thus, legal reforms did not fully translate into functional democratic strength. The study focuses on constitutional reforms but ignores their practical impact on parliamentary functioning. It does not assess post-reform performance.

Shah (2014) examines civil–military relations and their impact on Pakistan's democratic institutions. The study argues that the military has remained a dominant force in policymaking, even during civilian governments. It highlights that key decisions related to national security and foreign policy often bypass Parliament. This imbalance undermines democratic accountability and limits parliamentary authority. The study concludes that hybrid governance structures continue to define Pakistan's political system. The study explains civil–military imbalance but does not link it to parliamentary challenges during 2008–2018. It lacks institutional-level analysis.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the challenges faced by the Parliament of Pakistan during 2008–2018. It is based primarily on secondary data, including academic literature, government reports, parliamentary records, constitutional documents, and publications from national and international organizations. A descriptive and analytical design is used to explore key issues such as executive dominance, civil–military relations, political polarization, and institutional weaknesses. The study also adopts a historical perspective to contextualize these challenges within Pakistan's broader political development. To ensure reliability, information from multiple sources is critically analyzed and cross-checked. Although limited by the absence of primary data, the study provides a comprehensive and balanced understanding of parliamentary performance during the selected period.

Limitations

This study is primarily based on secondary data, which may include biases present in existing literature and reports. The absence of primary data, such as interviews or field observations, limits direct insights into parliamentary practices and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the study focuses only on the period 2008–2018, which may not fully capture broader historical and long-term institutional developments.

Civil–Military Imbalance

Civil–military imbalance remained one of the most significant challenges affecting the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Although the restoration of civilian



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rule following the 2008 elections created expectations for democratic consolidation, the military continued to retain substantial influence over key areas of policymaking, particularly national security, foreign relations, and counterterrorism. Parliament's role in these domains remained limited, as strategic decisions were often formulated within military and executive circles rather than through parliamentary debate. This structural imbalance weakened parliamentary sovereignty and restricted its capacity to function as the central institution of democratic governance (Shah, 2014).

The persistence of this imbalance can be understood in the context of Pakistan's historical experience, where repeated military interventions have shaped institutional power dynamics. Even during periods of civilian rule, the military has maintained a dominant role in decision-making processes, particularly in areas considered vital to national security. During 2008–2018, issues such as relations with India, the Afghan conflict, and cooperation with the United States in the War on Terror were largely managed outside parliamentary oversight. This continuity of military influence reflected the existence of a hybrid political system, where formal democratic institutions coexisted with strong extra-parliamentary actors (Rizvi, 2013).

Furthermore, the weakness of parliamentary oversight mechanisms reinforced this imbalance. Parliamentary committees dealing with defense and security affairs lacked both the authority and capacity to effectively scrutinize military policies and expenditures. This absence of institutional checks limited transparency and accountability, allowing centralized decision-making to persist. As a result, Parliament was unable to assert its constitutional role in governance, and civil–military imbalance continued to undermine democratic consolidation throughout this period (Shah, 2014).

Political Instability

Political instability remained a persistent challenge that significantly undermined the effectiveness of the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Although this decade witnessed democratic continuity, the political environment was marked by frequent confrontations between ruling and opposition parties. Parliamentary proceedings were often disrupted by protests, walkouts, and boycotts, limiting the ability of legislators to engage in meaningful debate and policymaking. Major political events, including mass protests and the 2014 sit-ins against the PML-N government, further weakened institutional stability and diverted attention away from legislative priorities (Jaffrelot, 2015).

This instability also hindered the development of long-term policy frameworks, as governments were frequently preoccupied with maintaining political survival rather than pursuing structural reforms. Parliamentary sessions often became arenas of political contestation rather than platforms for constructive dialogue. As a result, legislative productivity suffered, and important national issues were either delayed or inadequately addressed. The absence of sustained political consensus further limited Parliament's capacity to function as a stable and effective institution (Waseem, 2012).

Moreover, political instability had broader implications for democratic consolidation in Pakistan. It contributed to public disillusionment with democratic institutions and reinforced perceptions of governance inefficiency. The inability of Parliament to ensure continuity in policymaking weakened institutional credibility and created an environment of uncertainty. Consequently, political instability not only affected parliamentary performance but also posed a significant obstacle to the strengthening of democratic governance during this period (Talbot, 2012).



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Weak Democratic Culture

Weak democratic culture remained a fundamental constraint on the effective functioning of the Parliament of Pakistan during 2008–2018. Although democratic institutions were formally restored, the underlying political culture did not fully align with democratic norms such as tolerance, dialogue, and compromise. Parliamentary proceedings were often characterized by confrontational behavior, where political actors prioritized rivalry over cooperation. This environment limited the ability of Parliament to serve as a forum for constructive debate and consensus-building, which are essential elements of a functioning parliamentary democracy (Diamond, 1999).

The absence of internal democracy within political parties further exacerbated this challenge. Party leadership remained highly centralized, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of a few individuals rather than being distributed among elected representatives. As a result, members of Parliament often acted in accordance with party directives rather than engaging in independent legislative judgment. This weakened the representative character of Parliament and reduced the diversity of perspectives in legislative debates. Consequently, parliamentary deliberation was often shaped by party interests rather than broader national considerations (Jalal, 1995).

Furthermore, weak democratic culture contributed to the erosion of institutional norms and practices necessary for effective governance. Parliamentary procedures were frequently disregarded, and legislative processes were sometimes rushed without adequate discussion. The lack of respect for institutional rules and traditions undermined the credibility of Parliament and limited its ability to perform its constitutional functions. In this context, the persistence of weak democratic culture not only affected parliamentary performance but also posed a significant challenge to the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan (Khan, 2017).

Executive Dominance

Executive dominance remained a central challenge that limited the effectiveness of the Parliament of Pakistan during 2008–2018, despite significant constitutional reforms aimed at restoring parliamentary supremacy. Although the Eighteenth Amendment curtailed presidential powers and strengthened the role of the Prime Minister, the executive branch continued to dominate policymaking processes. In practice, Parliament often functioned as a body that endorsed decisions already formulated by the executive rather than acting as an independent institution of legislation and oversight. This imbalance reduced the effectiveness of Parliament in shaping national policy and holding the government accountable (Hussain, 2010).

One of the key manifestations of executive dominance was the frequent use of ordinance powers, which allowed the government to bypass parliamentary procedures. Important legislation was often introduced and implemented through executive authority, limiting the scope for debate and scrutiny within Parliament. Additionally, cabinet members frequently avoided active participation in parliamentary sessions, weakening accountability mechanisms such as question hour and parliamentary debates. This lack of engagement further diminished Parliament's ability to perform its constitutional role effectively (Riedel, 2011).

Moreover, weak oversight structures within Parliament reinforced executive control. Parliamentary committees, which are intended to monitor government performance and ensure transparency, often lacked the authority, resources, and independence necessary to function effectively. As a result, executive actions remained largely unchecked, contributing to centralized decision-making. This pattern not only constrained



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parliamentary authority but also highlighted the gap between constitutional provisions and actual governance practices, posing a significant challenge to democratic consolidation in Pakistan (PILDAT, 2018).

Judicial Activism and Institutional Conflict

The rise of judicial activism after the restoration of the judiciary in 2009 introduced a significant challenge for the Parliament of Pakistan in the form of institutional conflict. The judiciary increasingly asserted its authority by intervening in political and administrative matters, particularly in cases related to corruption, governance, and executive decisions. While such interventions were often justified as efforts to uphold the rule of law and ensure accountability, they also expanded the judiciary's role beyond traditional boundaries. This shift created tensions between Parliament and the judiciary, complicating the balance of power among state institutions (Siddique, 2013).

Judicial decisions during this period frequently had direct implications for parliamentary authority and political stability. High-profile cases, including the disqualification of elected officials and the review of executive actions, highlighted the judiciary's growing influence in governance. In some instances, these interventions were perceived as encroaching upon the legislative domain, raising concerns about institutional overreach. Parliament, in turn, struggled to respond effectively, often appearing reactive rather than proactive in defending its constitutional role. This dynamic contributed to an imbalance in institutional relationships and weakened parliamentary authority (Newberg, 1995).

Furthermore, the persistence of institutional conflict hindered the development of a coherent governance framework. Instead of complementing each other, state institutions often operated in competition, leading to policy uncertainty and administrative inefficiency. Parliament's inability to establish clear boundaries and assert its legislative supremacy exacerbated this situation. Consequently, while judicial activism strengthened accountability in certain respects, it also posed a significant challenge to parliamentary sovereignty and the overall process of democratic consolidation in Pakistan (Siddique, 2013).

Ineffective Committee System

The parliamentary committee system, which is considered the backbone of legislative oversight in democratic systems, remained largely ineffective in Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Although committees were formally established to scrutinize legislation, oversee executive actions, and ensure accountability, their practical performance fell short of expectations. Many committees lacked adequate institutional resources, technical expertise, and research support necessary for effective functioning. As a result, their ability to conduct in-depth policy analysis and hold the executive accountable remained limited (PILDAT, 2018).

In addition to structural weaknesses, the effectiveness of parliamentary committees was undermined by inconsistent participation of members. Attendance in committee meetings was often irregular, and in some cases, members showed limited interest in committee work. This lack of engagement reduced the seriousness of deliberations and weakened the quality of recommendations. Furthermore, committee reports were frequently ignored by the executive branch, which diminished the authority of these bodies and reduced their role in the governance process (Afzal, 2014).

Moreover, the limited enforcement power of committees further constrained their effectiveness. Even when committees identified policy shortcomings or governance failures, they lacked the mechanisms to ensure implementation of their recommendations.



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This weakened the system of checks and balances within the parliamentary framework. Consequently, the ineffective functioning of parliamentary committees significantly reduced Parliament's capacity to perform its oversight role, thereby limiting transparency, accountability, and democratic governance in Pakistan during this period (Cheema & Mohmand, 2018).

Corruption and Accountability Issues

Corruption and weak accountability mechanisms remained major challenges affecting the effectiveness and credibility of the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Allegations of corruption against political leaders and public office holders undermined the legitimacy of democratic institutions and reduced public confidence in Parliament. These issues were not only limited to financial misconduct but also included misuse of authority, patronage politics, and lack of transparency in decision-making processes. As a result, Parliament often struggled to maintain its image as a representative and accountable institution (Transparency International, 2017).

The role of accountability institutions during this period further complicated the situation. Bodies such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) were intended to ensure transparency and combat corruption; however, they were frequently criticized for being politically selective and lacking independence. The perception that accountability mechanisms were used as tools against political opponents weakened their credibility and effectiveness. This selective accountability created tensions between political actors and further polarized the political environment, limiting Parliament's ability to function cohesively (Siddiq, 2007).

Moreover, corruption and weak accountability had broader implications for governance and democratic consolidation. They reduced the effectiveness of policymaking and hindered the implementation of development initiatives. Public perception of widespread corruption contributed to a growing trust deficit between citizens and Parliament. This erosion of trust not only affected the legitimacy of parliamentary decisions but also discouraged public participation in democratic processes. Consequently, corruption and ineffective accountability mechanisms remained significant obstacles to strengthening parliamentary democracy in Pakistan during this period (Diamond, 1999).

Electoral System Challenges

Challenges related to the electoral system significantly affected the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Although regular elections were conducted, concerns regarding transparency, fairness, and political interference persisted. Allegations of rigging, manipulation of electoral processes, and uneven playing fields among political parties undermined public confidence in elections. Since Parliament derives its authority from electoral legitimacy, these issues directly impacted its credibility as a representative institution (International IDEA, 2016).

In addition, the institutional capacity of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) remained a subject of debate during this period. While reforms were introduced to improve electoral processes, implementation gaps continued to exist. Issues such as inaccurate voter lists, administrative inefficiencies, and limited enforcement of electoral laws weakened the overall electoral framework. These shortcomings raised questions about the independence and effectiveness of the ECP, further affecting the trustworthiness of electoral outcomes (Norris, 2014).

Moreover, delays in comprehensive electoral reforms contributed to the persistence of systemic weaknesses. Political parties often prioritized immediate electoral gains over



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long-term institutional improvements, which hindered meaningful reform efforts. As a result, the electoral system continued to face structural challenges that affected the legitimacy of Parliament. This situation reinforced public skepticism toward democratic institutions and limited the effectiveness of parliamentary governance during the period under study (Gallup Pakistan, 2017).

Media Influence and Political Pressure

The rapid expansion of electronic and print media during the period 2008–2018 significantly influenced the functioning of the Parliament of Pakistan. Media emerged as a powerful actor in shaping public opinion, increasing transparency, and highlighting issues of governance and accountability. Parliamentary proceedings, political debates, and legislative developments received extensive coverage, which enhanced public awareness of political processes. However, this increased visibility also brought new pressures on Parliament, as political actors often became more concerned with media representation than substantive policymaking (Cohen, 2011).

While media played a constructive role in promoting accountability, it also contributed to political polarization and sensationalism. News channels frequently focused on conflict-driven narratives, emphasizing political rivalries, scandals, and controversies rather than policy discussions. This approach influenced parliamentary behavior, as legislators increasingly prioritized media attention and public image over meaningful legislative engagement. As a result, parliamentary debates sometimes shifted from policy-oriented discussions to politically charged exchanges designed for media consumption (Hasan, 2009).

Moreover, the growing influence of media introduced challenges related to agenda-setting and public perception. Media outlets, often influenced by ownership interests or political affiliations, shaped narratives that could impact parliamentary legitimacy. This created a complex environment in which Parliament operated under constant public scrutiny while simultaneously facing pressures to respond to media-driven issues. Consequently, although media contributed to transparency, it also posed challenges to the quality of legislative deliberation and the overall effectiveness of parliamentary governance in Pakistan (Price, 2008).

Public Trust Deficit

A growing public trust deficit emerged as a significant challenge for the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Despite the continuation of democratic governance, a large segment of the population perceived Parliament as ineffective, corrupt, and disconnected from the everyday concerns of citizens. This perception was shaped by persistent governance issues, political instability, and the failure of elected representatives to deliver tangible improvements in socio-economic conditions. As a result, public confidence in parliamentary institutions remained low, undermining their legitimacy and authority (Gallup Pakistan, 2017).

The trust deficit was further intensified by the gap between electoral promises and actual policy outcomes. Political parties often campaigned on ambitious reform agendas; however, the inability to translate these promises into concrete results weakened public faith in democratic processes. Issues such as unemployment, inflation, and inadequate public services contributed to dissatisfaction among citizens. Parliament's perceived inability to address these challenges effectively reinforced the belief that democratic institutions were not functioning in the public interest (Diamond, 1999).

Moreover, declining public trust had broader implications for democratic consolidation in



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Pakistan. Low confidence in Parliament discouraged citizen participation in political processes, including voting, civic engagement, and public discourse. This disengagement weakened the representative nature of democracy and reduced accountability pressures on elected officials. Without strong public support, Parliament struggled to assert its role as the central institution of governance. Consequently, the trust deficit not only affected parliamentary performance but also posed a serious challenge to the sustainability of democratic governance in Pakistan during this period (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Security and Terrorism Challenges

Security and terrorism-related challenges remained a dominant factor shaping the functioning of the Parliament of Pakistan during the period 2008–2018. Pakistan faced a complex security environment characterized by internal militancy, counterterrorism operations, and regional instability, particularly along the Afghan border. These challenges required urgent and coordinated responses, which often shifted decision-making authority toward the military and executive institutions. As a result, Parliament's role in formulating and overseeing national security policy remained limited, reducing its influence in one of the most critical areas of governance (Riedel, 2011).

In addition, major counterterrorism initiatives, including military operations in tribal areas and the formulation of the National Action Plan (NAP) after the 2014 Peshawar attack, were largely driven by executive and military leadership. Although Parliament formally endorsed some of these measures, its involvement in their design and implementation was minimal. This marginalization highlighted the structural imbalance in Pakistan's governance system, where security imperatives often override democratic processes. Consequently, Parliament was unable to exercise effective oversight over security policies and expenditures (Shah, 2014).

Furthermore, the persistence of security challenges reinforced centralized decision-making and limited democratic accountability. The prioritization of security concerns often justified restrictions on debate and transparency, reducing Parliament's capacity to engage in critical policy discussions. This environment constrained the development of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to national security, where civilian perspectives could be adequately represented. Therefore, security and terrorism challenges not only affected governance outcomes but also significantly weakened parliamentary authority and democratic consolidation in Pakistan during this period (Rizvi, 2013).

Conclusion

The period from 2008 to 2018 represents a significant phase in Pakistan's democratic development, marked by the continuity of elected governments and important constitutional reforms. Despite these advancements, the Parliament of Pakistan faced multiple structural, political, and institutional challenges that limited its effectiveness as a central organ of governance. The persistence of civil–military imbalance continued to restrict parliamentary authority, particularly in areas related to national security and foreign policy, where decision-making remained largely outside legislative oversight.

At the same time, internal political dynamics further constrained parliamentary performance. Political instability, weak democratic culture, and executive dominance reduced the ability of Parliament to function as a forum for meaningful debate and policymaking. The rise of judicial activism introduced additional complexities, creating institutional tensions that affected the balance of power among state organs. Similarly, weak legislative capacity, ineffective committee systems, and governance inefficiencies hindered the development of comprehensive and well-informed policy frameworks.



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External and societal factors also played a critical role in shaping parliamentary functioning. Security challenges, media influence, electoral system weaknesses, and corruption contributed to a broader environment in which parliamentary authority was often undermined. The growing public trust deficit further weakened the legitimacy of Parliament, limiting its ability to represent citizen interests effectively and to strengthen democratic participation.

Overall, the experience of 2008–2018 reflects a hybrid political system in which formal democratic institutions operated alongside enduring structural constraints. While parliamentary continuity and constitutional reforms demonstrated resilience within the democratic framework, the persistence of institutional weaknesses and power imbalances highlighted the challenges of achieving substantive democratic consolidation. Strengthening parliamentary effectiveness requires not only legal and constitutional measures but also the development of institutional capacity, political maturity, and a commitment to accountability and transparency. The trajectory of Pakistan's democracy ultimately depends on the ability of Parliament to assert its constitutional role and function as an independent and effective institution of governance.

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