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A Federation Divided: Political Polarization and the Challenge to National Integration in Post-Election Pakistan 2024

Dr. Waqar Un Nisa

Mirpur University of Science & Technology

nisa.edu@must.edu.pk

Prof. Dr. Sultan Mahmood

Government College of Management Sciences Abbottabad

wafa69@yahoo.com

Dr. Sumaira Bibi

The University of Haripur

sumaira.bibi@uoh.edu.pk

Abstract

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan, rather than providing a clear mandate for governance, have resulted in a deeply fragmented and polarized political landscape that poses a significant threat to the country's national integration. This paper examines the outcome of the elections, which saw the three mainstream political parties the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) assume power in the country's three largest provinces, Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, respectively. This paper argues that this configuration, born from a controversial electoral process and set against a backdrop of profound institutional mistrust, is detrimental to Pakistan's democratic stability and national cohesion. It institutionalizes political rivalry at the provincial level, paralyzes federal governance on critical national issues, and exacerbates the already severe trust deficit between the state and its citizens. Drawing on the historical precedent of the 2006 Charter of Democracy, this paper concludes by proposing a series of actionable policy recommendations for political leadership. It calls for the urgent negotiation of a new, inclusive "National Compact" to establish functional rules of engagement, ensure the disengagement of the military from politics, and build consensus on institutional reforms, thereby creating a pathway toward national reconciliation and democratic survival.

Keywords: Political Polarization, Pakistan Elections 2024, National Integration, Civil-Military Relations, Charter of Democracy, Federalism, Governance Crisis

Introduction

Pakistan's political history has been a tumultuous journey marked by a persistent struggle to establish a stable and functioning democracy (Rizvi, 1988; *The Erosion of Democracy in Pakistan*, 2024). The cycle of weak civilian governments, military interventions, and a deeply entrenched trust deficit between the state and its citizens has repeatedly undermined democratic consolidation (Khan & Kha, 2019; Yousaf, 2020). The general elections of February 8, 2024, were held amidst this challenging environment, compounded by one of the country's worst economic crises, a resurgence of terrorism, and extreme political polarization (South Asian Voices, 2024; Brookings Institution, 2023).

The outcome of these elections did not produce a stabilizing mandate but instead created a uniquely fragmented and perilous political arrangement. Following a controversial electoral process marred by allegations of pre-poll manipulation and vote rigging, no single



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party secured a clear majority (Delhi Policy Group, 2024; Crisis Group, 2024). This led to the formation of a weak coalition government at the federal level, while the country's three largest provinces fell under the control of three different, and mutually antagonistic, political parties: the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Punjab, the PPP in Sindh, and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Delhi Policy Group, 2024).

This paper addresses a critical question for Pakistan's future: Is this fractured democratic mandate, with rival parties entrenched in provincial power bases, a useful evolution toward a more decentralized federation, or is it a harmful development that threatens to accelerate national disintegration? This research argues for the latter. The post-2024 political configuration represents a dangerous new phase in Pakistan's democratic crisis. By institutionalizing political conflict along provincial lines, it creates a constant state of friction between the federal center and the provinces, making consensus on vital national issues such as economic reform and security policy nearly impossible. This paralysis further erodes public trust and risks deepening ethnic and regional fault lines, thereby posing a direct threat to national integration (Jalal, 2024; Khan, 2024).

To address this challenge, this paper proposes that Pakistan's political leadership must look to its own history for a solution. The 2006 Charter of Democracy (CoD), an agreement between the then-rival PPP and PML-N, provides a precedent for political reconciliation in the face of a national crisis (Mehmood & Chawla, 2022). This study concludes with a set of actionable recommendations for a "New Charter of Democracy," urging all three major parties to negotiate a new social and political compact focused on national integration, institutional reform, and the supremacy of constitutional democracy.

The Fractured Mandate of 2024

The 2024 general elections were held in a climate of intense political polarization and widespread public distrust (Brookings Institution, 2023). The period leading up to the vote was characterized by a severe crackdown on the PTI, following the violent protests of May 9, 2023 (Crisis Group, 2024; PILDAT, 2024). The party's chairman, Imran Khan, was imprisoned on multiple convictions, its senior leadership was dismantled, and it was ultimately stripped of its iconic cricket bat electoral symbol, forcing its candidates to run as independents (Delhi Policy Group, 2024; East Asia Institute, 2024). This pre-poll environment created a widespread perception that the electoral process was being engineered to favor the PML-N, whose leader, Nawaz Sharif, had recently returned from exile with his own past convictions swiftly overturned (South Asian Voices, 2024; Delhi Policy Group, 2024).

Despite these hurdles, the election results delivered a stunning surprise. Independent candidates, the vast majority backed by the PTI, emerged with the largest bloc of seats in the National Assembly, winning 102 seats. The PML-N secured 73 seats, and the PPP came in third with 54 (Delhi Policy Group, 2024). This outcome was a clear rejection of the military's perceived political engineering and a powerful demonstration of Imran Khan's enduring popularity (Delhi Policy Group, 2024).

However, without a party symbol, the PTI-backed independents could not claim their share of reserved seats for women and minorities, preventing them from forming a government on their own (Freedom House, 2025). This paved the way for their rivals, the PML-N and PPP, to form a coalition government at the center, with Shehbaz Sharif returning as Prime Minister and Asif Ali Zardari assuming the presidency (Deccan Herald, 2024).

The most significant outcome for national integration, however, was the division of power at the provincial level. The election results solidified the regional strongholds of the three main parties, creating a political map defined by division:



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- **Punjab:** The country's largest province and political heartland is governed by the PML-N (*Pakistan Muslim League (N)*, n.d.).
- **Sindh:** The PPP maintained its decades-long grip on power in its traditional stronghold (Delhi Policy Group, 2024).
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP):** The PTI, whose candidates joined the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) to form a parliamentary bloc, secured a dominant majority, reflecting its deep support in the province (*Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf*, n.d.).

This unprecedented fragmentation, where each major political force controls a provincial government, has institutionalized the country's political polarization, transforming provincial capitals into centers of opposition to the federal government and to each other.

A Tripartite Standoff: The Threat to National Integration

The democratic arrangement resulting from the 2024 elections, while superficially appearing as a form of power-sharing, is in practice a recipe for governance paralysis and national disunity. With each of the three major parties entrenched in their respective provincial governments, the political landscape has become a zero-sum battleground, undermining the potential for the cooperation necessary to tackle Pakistan's existential crises.

Deepening Political Polarization and Governance Paralysis

Therefore, the post 2024-election's political structure is inherently confrontational. The federal government, led by a PML-N and PPP coalition, finds itself at odds with a PTI-led government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This dynamic creates a constant state of friction over the allocation of resources, federal policy implementation, and constitutional authority. Critical national challenges require a unified approach, but the current setup actively works against it.

- **Economic Crisis:** Pakistan is dependent on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and requires deep, painful structural reforms, including expanding the tax base and cutting expenditures (East Asia Institute, 2024; VIF India, 2025). Such reforms are politically unpopular and cannot be implemented without consensus between the federal government and the provinces. The current polarized environment makes such consensus virtually impossible, risking further economic instability (Crisis Group, 2024).
- **Security Challenges:** The country faces a significant resurgence of terrorism, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (VIF India, 2025). Effectively countering this threat requires seamless cooperation between federal intelligence agencies and provincial law enforcement, which is controlled by the PTI in KP. The deep mistrust between the PTI and the central government, which the PTI views as illegitimate, severely hampers this necessary coordination (Crisis Group, 2024).

Erosion of the Federation and National Cohesion

Beyond policy paralysis, the provincial entrenchment of rival parties threatens the very fabric of the federation. In a multi-ethnic and diverse country like Pakistan, national integration has always been a challenge, with smaller provinces often feeling marginalized



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by the powerful center (Jalal, 2024; Khan, 2024). The current political configuration risks exacerbating these historical grievances:

- **Center-Province Friction:** The federal government may be perceived as using its authority to undermine provinces led by the opposition, while provincial governments may, in turn, resist federal initiatives, framing them as politically motivated attacks. This dynamic is already visible in disputes over resource allocation and the control of provincial assets (Khan, 2024).
- **Weakening National Identity:** When mainstream parties prioritize provincial power bases over national consensus, politics become increasingly regionalized. This can weaken the bonds of national unity and empower ethno-nationalist movements that challenge the legitimacy of the federal state (Jalal, 2024).

The Collapse of Public Trust

The legitimacy of the entire democratic system is at stake. The 2024 elections were marred by such extensive allegations of manipulation that they have deepened the public's already profound cynicism toward the democratic process (South Asian Voices, 2024). The PTI's narrative of a "stolen mandate" resonates widely, meaning the current federal government is viewed as illegitimate by a significant portion of the population (Crisis Group, 2024). This erosion of public trust is corrosive, it delegitimizes state institutions, reduces civic engagement, and creates a fertile ground for instability (Khan & Kha, 2019; Yousaf, 2020). A government that lacks a credible mandate will struggle to ask its people for the sacrifices needed to navigate the country's severe economic and security crises (CEU Democracy Institute, 2024).

A Path Forward: The Imperative of a "New Charter of Democracy"

Pakistan's current political deadlock is untenable and poses a grave danger to the nation. To break this cycle of confrontation, the country's political leadership must find the collective will to prioritize national interest over partisan gain. The historical precedent for such a move exists in the **Charter of Democracy (CoD)**, signed in 2006 by the then-archrivals, the PPP and the PML-N (Mehmood & Chawla, 2022). That document, born out of a shared struggle against military rule, was an unprecedented agreement to respect democratic norms and end the destructive politics of the 1990s (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021; Radio Pakistan, 2023).

While the original CoD was imperfect and its spirit was later violated, its core achievement was demonstrating that political consensus on the rules of the democratic game is possible (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021). Today, Pakistan is in desperate need of a "**New Charter of Democracy**", or a "**National Compact**," that includes all three major political parties PML-N, PPP, and PTI as well as other significant political and civil society stakeholders (Umar, 2025; Khosa, 2025).

Recommendations for a New National Compact

A new charter must be a forward-looking document that addresses the specific ailments of Pakistan's current democratic crisis. The following are key areas where consensus is urgently needed:

1. **Establish Clear Rules of Political Engagement:** The foundation of any new compact must be a shared commitment to democratic principles. This includes an agreement to respect the outcomes of free and fair elections, to end the use of state institutions for political victimization, and to engage in constructive opposition



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within parliament rather than through perpetual street agitation (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021; Khosa, 2025).

2. **Ensure Civilian Supremacy:** The charter must unequivocally reaffirm the core principle of the 2006 CoD, that the military establishment must have no role in politics (Bhutto.org, n.d.). All parties must pledge not to solicit the support of the military to come into power or to dislodge an elected government. This should be coupled with a consensus on strengthening parliamentary oversight of the defense budget and intelligence agencies.
3. **Commit to Institutional Reform:** To restore public trust, the parties must agree on a concrete agenda for strengthening key state institutions. This includes reforms to ensure the independence and competence of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the judiciary and strengthening anti-corruption bodies by insulating them from political interference (Modern Diplomacy, 2023; Khosa, 2025).
4. **Strengthen Federalism through Empowered Local Governments:** A key weakness in Pakistan's democracy is the absence of empowered local governments (Umar, 2025). A new charter should include a constitutional commitment to hold regular, free, and fair local government elections and to devolve political, administrative, and financial authority to the grassroots level. This would not only improve service delivery but also create a new cadre of political leadership, breaking the hold of dynastic elites (Babar, 2015).
5. **Forge Consensus on National Crises:** The charter should establish a framework for building national consensus on existential challenges. This could involve creating empowered, cross-party parliamentary committees on the economy, national security, and climate change, tasked with developing long-term, non-partisan policy solutions (Crisis Group, 2024).

Conclusion

The 2024 general elections have left Pakistan in a state of democratic peril. The resulting political landscape, defined by a weak federal coalition and powerful, mutually hostile provincial governments, is a recipe for instability and a direct threat to national integration. The current trajectory of zero-sum politics, if left unchecked, will deepen the country's economic and security crises and further erode the already fragile trust between citizens and the state.

However, crisis can also be a catalyst for change. The failure of the current system is now apparent to all. The path forward does not lie in further confrontation but in political reconciliation. The leaders of the PML-N, PPP, and PTI have a historic responsibility to rise above their immediate partisan interests and negotiate a new national compact. By reviving the spirit of the CoD and forging a new consensus on the fundamental rules of governance, they can pull the country back from the brink. Such a compact is no longer just a political ideal, it is a national necessity for the survival of Pakistan's democratic experiment.



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