

# GENESIS OF PERENNIAL INSTABILITY AND INEFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN: ROLE OF REGIONAL PARTIES AND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES IN COALITION GOVERNMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

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## INTRODUCTION

Coalition governments are a central feature of parliamentary democracies around the world, especially in politically fragmented societies where no single party wins a parliamentary majority (Müller & Strøm, 2000). Coalitions are used to increase political representation, add diversity across regions and ethnic groups, and ensure consensus management (Lijphart, 2012). A coalition government is often associated with the positive aspects of ‘openness, democracy, and a high level of institutional consensus and policy stability’ in comparative politics (Lijphart, 1977). But across states, the success and stability of coalition governments vary widely depending on the strength of democratic institutions, the maturity of political parties, the nature of political competition, and the presence or absence of extra-constitutional influences (Riker, 1962). In stable democracies, coalitions may form around shared interests and policy convergence (Strøm et al., 2008). Coalitions can serve as devices of political bargaining, elite accommodation, and transactional politics in semi- or weakly institutionalized political systems. In this sense, Pakistan is one of the countries where coalitions are endemic to political instability, governance inefficiency, and institutional imbalance (Jalal, 1995; Nasr, 2004a).

Since 2008, when parliamentary democracy was restored in Pakistan, none of the Federal governments has been a single-party government, but a coalition of regional political parties and “electables” – those members of parliament elected independently. Coalition politics is not bad in itself, but in the context of Pakistan, it has not been good for political continuity, policy continuity, and good governance. The coalition government in Pakistan has not been known for its ideological unity. Patronage bargains, transactional dependence, and strategic defections have been the most important features of opportunistic alliances (Waseem, 2022; Rizvi, 2013; Akhtar, 2018, 2022). Regional political parties and independent candidates, in many cases, are given ministries, development funds, legislative seats, and political power based on the number of votes they received in the election, even though they would not have received them. This results in an increased likelihood of changes in government and a lack of consensus on policy, a constant political negotiation process with a short-term focus on the negotiating actors (Shafqat, 2019; Shah, 2014).

In this regard, one can trace this instability within the broader political and institutional framework of Pakistan. In the post-independence history of Pakistan, however, a series of military interventions, weak party institutionalization, personalized political leadership, and divisive electoral results has been observed. Such structural issues have led to the absence of a parliamentary tradition and to a political culture in which the potential to form and dissolve coalitions is not necessarily democratic but is determined by the military, in particular. Hybrid governance structures remain in place; coalition politics is used to form, manage, and even destabilize coalitions to replicate shared institutional forms of power. This results in constant pressure on governments of this kind from other political parties, regional interests, and extra-parliamentary institutions, leading to paralysis in policy formation, governance failures, and recurrent political crises (Jalal, 1990; Rizvi, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2002; Siddiqa, 2007, Yusuf, 2018).

In this broader political context, the present study aims to explore the fundamental drivers of the existing instability and poor governance in Pakistan by examining coalition governments from 2008

to 2024. There were many reasons for choosing the topic. Coalition politics has become a feature of the Pakistani political landscape, with several mainstream political parties. And a lot of the writing has been on military takeover or constitutional crisis. Regional political parties and independently elected members of the Parliament, in the context of coalition politics in Pakistan, have not received much attention in the academic literature. But these characters frequently impact the collapse, construction, and functioning of government as they are the politically 'swing' characters, who can 'swing' in and out of the political opportunity. They have strategic consequences for legislative unity, executive stability, and governance outcomes.

Secondly, the period 2008-2024 is a very interesting one to compare, as during this period a coalition government of three major political parties, the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was formed. The cases will allow for a comparison of governance outcomes across broadly similar institutional contexts, with different leadership styles, coalition management strategies, and political contexts. The inclusion of cases is further enhanced by the observation that two of the coalition governments were able to serve their governments, but the PTI-led government was not. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the reasons for the instability of the coalition governments in a homogenous constitutional and parliamentary system in Pakistan. The dynamics of coalitions and the roles of non-parliamentary actors in their formation are given special attention. The study is also intended to expose the systemic nature of federal coalition governments and the effect of coalition government on the democratic fragility and governance crisis in Pakistan.

In this context, the central research question that guided this study is: "How do regional political parties and independently-elected parliamentarians – also known as electables – in Pakistan shape the formation, functioning, and termination of coalition governments?" This study attempts to answer this question by offering a conceptual framework of opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, and opportunistic exit in the coalition politics of Pakistan, which is also affected by the presence of non-democratic institutions. The study aims to provide insights into the structural adjustments needed to achieve stable and effective democratic governance in Pakistan and to further the debate on coalition governance and the relationship between democratic instability and the state-society nexus in Pakistan's hybrid political system.

The study is qualitative and mixed-method, namely an archival study and semi-structured interviews. The archival material comprises parliamentary debates, election results, coalition agreements, and official documents, as well as party documents, newspaper archives, and reports from domestic and international election observation organizations. Semi-structured interviews with the members of the National Assembly of the regional political parties and with independent parliamentarians have also been undertaken. A qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyze the collected data. It helped the study to test and build upon existing theoretical explanations of coalition instability, political opportunism, and institutional interventions, drawing on parliamentary politics in Pakistan.

This research project has some limitations. The study does not examine the provincial-level politics of coalitions (which may vary significantly by region and ethnicity). Secondly, the sample was second-

generation; however, it was not representative of all linguistic communities and ethnic groups in Pakistan, particularly the Sindhis and Hazara. Thirdly, the study is confined to the democratic era post-2008 and thus does not explore the coalition politics of the previous eras of Pakistan's political history in detail. The above constraints suggest that the information obtained should be interpreted in the light of the institutional and historical setting of the cases chosen.

## **SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

This study examines how, since 2008, coalition governments in Pakistan have contributed to political instability and governance inefficiencies. It investigates how regional political parties and independent candidates exploit coalition politics for short-term political gains, often at the expense of long-term governance stability. The research also seeks to understand the role of ideological divergence among coalition partners in fostering policy stagnation and governance paralysis. Adding to these three research questions, there are two other pertinent questions. One is the extent to which military intervention has influenced the formation and dissolution of coalition governments, thereby shaping the country's perennial democratic disequilibrium. This study investigates whether institutional reforms in electoral laws and party structures could mitigate the negative impacts of coalition governance and contribute to more stable democratic governance in Pakistan.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the structural deficiencies, political dynamics, and systemic weaknesses inherent in coalition governance in Pakistan. In Pakistan, coalition governments have consistently produced political instability, policy stagnation, and governance inefficiencies. This study aims to explore the underlying causes of this perennial crisis by identifying the factors that have led to the failure of coalition politics in Pakistan, particularly in the context of political opportunism, the strategic leverage exerted by smaller regional parties and independent candidates, and the role of military interference, as well as the lack of political appetite for a reformist agenda.

We aim to assess the extent to which coalition governments in Pakistan have been shaped by short-term political bargaining rather than ideological or policy-driven consensus. We strive to analyze how the absence of a unifying national vision among coalition partners has led to governance paralysis, political fragmentation, and the alienation of mainstream parties from their electoral base. By doing so, this study offers a comprehensive explanation of why coalition governments in Pakistan have failed to achieve sustainable governance, policy consensus, and policy continuity.

This research also investigates the role of non-democratic forces, particularly the military establishment, in shaping coalition dynamics. Given the history of Pakistan's political landscape, where coalition governments have often been engineered through military influence, this study seeks to determine how these interventions have shaped political incentives, discouraged democratic consolidation, and fostered a system of transactional politics where alliances are built and broken based on immediate power gains rather than long-term governance objectives.

Another essential objective of this study is to examine the broader policy implications of unstable coalition politics in Pakistan. This includes evaluating the effects of coalition governance on key policy areas such as economic management, social development, infrastructure planning, and national integration. By analyzing governance failures in these areas, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how coalition politics has hindered reformist agendas and prevented the institutionalization of stable governance structures.

To ensure practicability, we have decided to confine ourselves to three coalition governments at the federal level, i.e., 2008-2013, 2013-2018, and 2018-2024. Focusing on three main political parties (PMLN, PPP, and PTI), we can investigate the underlying causes of the worsening governance crisis

and identify potential mechanisms to help mitigate the negative impacts of coalition governance in Pakistan. This may include policy recommendations to improve electoral laws and foster politics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Coalition governments are common in parliamentary democracies where no single party holds a legislative majority (Müller & Strøm, 2000; Lijphart, 1999). Institutional incentives and strategic calculations influence their formation among political actors seeking office, policy influence, and survival in competitive environments (Riker, 1962). Alienation of non-democratic actors has not only influenced the electoral arithmetic of coalition politics in Pakistan but has also become a structural aspect of the state, resulting in poor party institutionalization, personalized leadership, ethnic fragmentation, and, ultimately, coalition politics (Jalal, 1995; Waseem, 2005; Shah, 2014). This has created a volatile climate in which coalition creation, operation, and dissolution are intimately linked (Akhtar, 2018; Talbot, 2012). In general, the literature on coalition formation holds that a political party seeking office, policy, or votes builds a partnership that may result in an ideal outcome (Riker, 1962). However, extra-parliamentary forces and non-parliamentary modalities of power weaken these motives in hybrid politics, such as in Pakistan, by defying the conventional logic of coalition (Waseem, 2022; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006).

Coalition governments in Pakistan have been a constant but systemically unstable component of the parliamentary system, owing to four major incidents of electoral dichotomy, institutional disequilibrium, and civil-military hybrid regulation (Jalal, 1995; Waseem, 2005; Rizvi, 2013; Shah, 2014). The scholarly literature generally frames the formation of alliances in Pakistan's multi-ethnic and regionally diverse political environment, where no single party has ever achieved a parliamentary majority, thereby forcing alliances among ideologically opposed entities (Adeney, 2007; Talbot, 2012). The state is federally organized, with political authority distributed across the provinces, allowing regionally based parties to work together as coalition partners in centralized political control (Waseem, 2010; Adeney, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2013). Nonetheless, where coalition formation is identified as an institutional process resulting from a fragmented mandate to elect, scholars describe coalitions as being based on political expediency and compromise among elites rather than program consistency and ideology (Riker, 1962; Waseem, 2005; Laver & Schofield, 1990; Mufti et al., 2020).

Recent relations between politicians and industry changes in rules in coalition government Following the advent of democratic elections, there was a hasty association of politics-industry relations with what could be conceived as opportunistic attachment, wherein political parties (within the present case study) join the major political party based on the promise of receiving access to the state apparatus, networks of patronage, and receive access to the political bargaining (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Martin, 2014, 2016).

Theoretical literature has provided insight into the idea of coalition politics, in that, in Colombian politics, the factors that affect the behavior of elites are inherent to the political institutions, which, in the case of Colombian politics, are typified by unstable political structures and decision-making through informal networks (Riker, 1962; Helmke & Levitsky, 2006; Laver & Schofield, 1990; Leal Buitrago, 2016; North, 1990). These types of incentives create strong patronage politics in Pakistan, where one of the most intriguing concepts is opportunistic alignment, which implies that minor groups and individual legislators align with major parties not because their ideologies coincide with

those of the priority areas, but rather because such alignment will result in financial and political benefits (Waseem, 2005; Keefer & Khemani, 2005; Khan, 2005; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Opportunism is defined as the size principle, in which political actors aim to establish the smallest winning coalition possible, with each party seeking maximum gains at the lowest available cost in terms of profit distribution (Riker, 1962; Axelrod 1970; Laver & Shepsle, 1996). This is the mindset that pervades Pakistan's coalition politics (Jalal, 1995; Talbot, 2012).

The history of coalition government in Pakistan demonstrates that **post-election bargaining has played a more decisive role than pre-electoral alliances**, reinforcing the opportunistic nature of political coalitions (Waseem, 2012; Rais, 1997). Empirical studies of Pakistan's party system show that fragmented electoral outcomes frequently produce **hung parliaments**, compelling parties to negotiate settlements after elections rather than forming stable ideological blocs beforehand. One such example is the coalition configurations of the 1990s and the post-2008 democratic period, where smaller parties leveraged their pivotal parliamentary positions to extract **disproportionate concessions**, including key ministerial portfolios, targeted development funds, and policy influence (Ahmed, 2013; Zaidi, 2018). In particular, the 2008 coalition illustrates how alliance partners repeatedly threatened to withdraw to secure political and material gains, underscoring the fragility and transactional character of coalition arrangements. Consequently, coalition politics in Pakistan can be understood as fundamentally **transactional**, in which political support is contingent on immediate material incentives rather than on long-term ideological commitment (Jalal, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2002).

The activities of coalition administrations in Pakistan demonstrate the significance of ongoing transactional reliance, based on ongoing discussions between coalition partners, to ensure continuity in their involvement in government operations. In contrast to programmatic coalitions in stable democracies, which are based on stable policy agreements, Pakistani coalitions are based on dynamic, ambiguous bargaining that necessitates frequent renegotiation of conditions (Waseem, 2012; Kamran, 2008). This reliance has also fostered a climate of imbalance and unpredictability in its policies, with coalition partners frequently resisting the withdrawal of support to extract additional concessions (Niaz, 2010). According to the literature, a lack of adequate party discipline and institutional channels for dispute resolution in coalitions exacerbates this situation (Akhtar, 2018).

In Pakistan's ongoing political economy, the state plays a critical role in patronage and resource distribution, which is directly related to the notion of unbroken transactional reliance (Niaz, 2010). Coalition partners view their involvement in government as a means of securing state funding for their political networks and constituencies (Waseem, 2012; Javid, 2011). This is how rent-seeking behavior works (Kamran, 2008; Krueger, 1974; Talbot, 2012). This not only leads to policy inconsistencies but also renders the government ineffectual because decisions are made in favor of the coalition's survival rather than the people's (Riker, 1962; Laver & Schofield, 1990). Another effect is the need to keep coalition members satisfied to gain their policy support, making long-term planning and reform implementation more difficult (Haq, 2016).

Another important component of how coalitions work in Pakistan is the impact of non-political entities, particularly the military, on political and coalition activity. The corpus of work on civil-military interactions has shown that coalition governments can effectively operate within a hybrid system that includes both formal democratic institutions and informal as well as military police (Adeney, 2017; Malik, 2024). This bi-laterality gives coalition politics a new meaning, as politicians must consider not just how to form coalitions, but also the concerns and interests of the military establishment (Ali, 2025). Some extra-constitutional players undermine coalitions by changing incentive structures and confusing predictions of what will happen.

Coalition failures in Pakistan may be explained by strategic drift and exit payoffs, which are described as the tendency to withdraw when coalition members' interests are not met or when more desirable forms of collaboration become available. According to the literature, calculus ambiguity among coalition partners in Pakistan is a common phenomenon in alliance maintenance, implying their willingness to abandon the alliance when the cost of membership exceeds the benefits (Waseem, 2012; Akhtar, 2018, Ray, 2007; Bandyopadhyay & Chatterjee, 2006). This is consistent with the notion of stability in alliance games, which holds that players will leave a coalition if they believe they can obtain greater pay under different conditions (Laver & Shepsle, 1996).

This argument is reinforced by data from Pakistan's history of coalition administration, in which large supporters abandoned their loyalties in favor of other politically advantageous organizations (Waseem, 2022; Kamran, 2008; Talbot, 2012). The efficacy of coalition politics is determined by the lack of commitment mechanisms and the tendency to focus on short-term plans, as the great majority of alliances are reformed regularly (Moe, 2005; North, 1990). Furthermore, a diversity of coalition-formation options that non-political entities may propose in many circumstances raises the exit benefits of coalition partners, increasing the likelihood of government failure (Waseem, 2022; Akhtar, 2018; Haq, 2013).

Pakistan's coalition government has historically been unstable, and the situation is deteriorating due to oppositional alignment, transactional dependence, and strategic divergence. Over time, opposition creates ideologically incoherent alliances based on opportunistic agreement that require constant reinforcement through transactional effects, eventually resulting in strategic drift as partners reconsider their interests and disjoin when their interests are favorable (Siddiq, 2007; Husain, 2018; Kamran, 2008). This is a circular cycle that demonstrates how Pakistan's coalition administrations are fundamentally weak and illustrates the limitations of typical institutionalist understandings of electoral or constitutional systems.

Ilhan Niaz's concept of a culture of power provides a broader explanation for why Pakistan's coalition administrations remain weak. Niaz describes the state as a personalized and hierarchical entity dominated by elite networks that wield power arbitrarily and informally (Niaz, 2010). This type of power culture prevents political practices from becoming institutionalized. It promotes a climate of opportunism, favoritism, and short-termism, which is detrimental to the stability of coalition government. Here, coalition politics resembles elite negotiation rather than democratic administration.

Tahir Kamran's research on democracy and governance in Pakistan indicates that the structural impediments to democracy are sociopolitical fragmentation, institutional weakness, and a history of authoritarianism. According to Kamran, the same features make coalition governments both necessary and fundamentally fragile, as they must balance competing interests and navigate a complex power program (Kamran, 2008). The persistence of these structural constraints suggests that the volatility of coalition administrations in Pakistan is caused not only by individual conduct but also by structural difficulties.

Mohammad Waseem's research on political strife in Pakistan remains a discovery about the impact of ethnic contestability among the elite and institutional incomprehensibility on the coalition. According to Waseem, Pakistani politics is founded on a managed democracy framework in which elections and political affiliations are susceptible to extraconstitutional pressures. This will encourage opportunistic politics and hamper the formation of a durable political coalition, as political parties are more concerned with securing quick funding than with long-term promises (Waseem, 2012, 2022). The instability of coalition politics reflects the instability of Pakistan's political system.

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar's analysis of Pakistan's hegemonic struggles provides fundamental insights into the socioeconomic aspects of parliamentary politics, highlighting the importance of class structure, territorial differences, and ideology in shaping political alliances. According to Akhtar, the coalition government is primarily seen as a mechanism for different elite groups to collaborate in the transfer of resources and power, rather than a place where substantial policy may be developed (Akhtar, 2018, 2022). This viewpoint emphasizes the need to consider the broader socioeconomic context when explaining why coalition governments fail in Pakistan.

According to the literature, electoral engineering and institutional manipulation also affect coalition dynamics (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002). This has been especially true in hybrid regimes, where foreign actors intervene in democratic processes (Diamond, 2002; Ottaway, 2003). According to studies on civil-military relations, the military institution has historically supported or opposed coalition governments, typically to maintain influence over political processes (Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2007; Croissant et al., 2023; Feaver, 1999). This meddling posture not only corrupts electoral competition but also breaks coalitions by altering the power balance among political players.

Along with institutional and structural variables, the literature acknowledges the influence of leadership and political culture on coalition outcomes. Coalition instability is exacerbated by the absence of a consensus-based political culture and a high level of adversarial politics, since political leaders typically prioritize partisan aims over common governance. The fact that political actors do not trust each other exacerbates this unfavorable attitude, which, in the long run, reduces collaboration and increases the likelihood of the coalition collapsing.

Historical research, both current and historical, demonstrates that no single reason causes coalition administrations in Pakistan to fail. Instead, it should be seen as a complex symbiosis of opportunistic partnership, continual transactional dependence, strategic disparity, and exit rewards. They are part of a larger institutional structure that includes weak institutions, patronage politics, and mixed forms of government, all of which reduce the chances of effective and long-term coalition rule.

Scholarly studies on coalition governments in Pakistan offer a thorough examination of the factors shaping their formation, functioning, and collapse. Coalition governments are an unavoidable feature of Pakistan's fractured politics. However, their volatility is so pervasive that fundamental flaws in how things are established and people behave make it difficult to establish an institutionalized democracy. The theory of opportunistic alignment, perpetual transactional dependency, strategic divergence, and exit bonus provides a powerful analytical model for investigating the phenomenon of coalition-building and eventual disintegration within the Pakistani government, as well as the importance of institutional and political reform as a potential solution.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The failure of the coalition governments in Pakistan is conceptually and theoretically grounded in the broader framework of comparative politics, rational-choice institutionalism, and political economy. Coalitions are perceived as dynamic arenas of strategic interaction within this framework, influenced by incentives, uncertainty, and structural limitations (Riker, 1962; Laver & Schofield, 1990). Coalitions are established when no single political party holds a majority in the parliament. In such cases, a coalition must be established among diverse actors, which does not inherently depend on ideological agreement. Instead, it is encapsulated within a framework of intentional activities in which political actors are perpetually engaged in contemplation and seeking alternatives (North, 1990). The situation in Pakistan is exacerbated by poor organization, division along party lines, and external influences on parliament, resulting in highly unstable coalition politics (Rizvi, 2013; Siddiq, 2007; Husain, 2018; Zaidi, 2018). The conceptual framework presented here posits that the failure of coalitions is not arbitrary or solely a consequence of general instability; rather, it arises from the interaction of three interdependent mechanisms: opportunistic alignment, continuous transactional dependence, and strategic exit, along with associated exit incentives. The efficacy of these mechanisms is shaped by the structural conditions of the political system and the asymmetries in incentives within it.

The primary premise of this approach is the rational choice theory, which posits that political players are utility-maximizing individuals operating under conditions of uncertainty and inadequate knowledge (Riker, 1962; Downs, 1957). The establishment of a coalition is not contingent upon the alignment of shared interests in policy formulation. It focuses on techniques for attaining office, securing resources, and enduring in the political arena. This preliminary stage in coalition politics is referred to as an opportunistic alliance. At this point, smaller organizations, smaller presentations, or other lesser entities infiltrate larger parties not necessarily to endorse their ideologies, but to seek to acquire more than their equitable share of benefits. In institutional economics, there is a prevalent concept of opportunism, in which individuals act in their self-interest despite structural difficulties, knowledge asymmetry, and the absence of enforcement mechanisms (Müller & Strøm, 1999). The party system in Pakistan is chaotic, lacking a robust ideological divide, which facilitates political actors in switching allegiances with ease (Jalal, 1995; Nasr, 2004b; Shafiq, 2019). This explains the potential for opportunistic alignment. This aligns theoretically with theories of office-seeking coalition formation, which often posit that parties pursue power advantages at the expense of policy coherence in contexts marked by minimal institutional constraints and heightened political uncertainty.

This opportunistic mindset is further reinforced by the characteristics of the Pakistani political economy, which predominantly operates on a framework of patronage and rent-seeking as the primary mechanism of political trade (Husain, 2018). Forming coalitions is a strategy that facilitates access to state resources, which are subsequently redistributed to garner political support and secure electoral success. This method grants minor parties a central position that is disproportionate to their size. In fragmented parliaments, they serve as kingmakers. This enables them to negotiate further, making them ready to accept the expected rewards rather than a long-term commitment. The conjectured implication is that the formation of a coalition is inherently unpredictable, as it

depends on assessments that may fluctuate with changes in the political landscape. Opportunistic alignment does not foster enduring relationships; rather, it engenders transient agreements characterized by continual renegotiation and inherent volatility.

Continuous transaction dependency is the second process influencing the formation of coalitions. This notion illustrates the dynamics of talks within alliances. In such instances, the less prominent partners determine the method of assistance by consistently offering material and non-material compensation. In contrast to one-time negotiations, transactional reliance is a flexible cycle rather than a singular event; thus, it is dynamic and recursive, establishing a self-perpetuating equilibrium (Ahmed, 2023; McCartney & Zaidi, 2020; North et al., 2009). This process is theoretically grounded in patron-client and exchange theories of political economy, rendering resource distribution within a political relationship highly complex. In the absence of institutionalized coalition agreements or effective enforcement mechanisms in Pakistan, this dependency progressively intensifies as the criteria become increasingly ambiguous.

Transactional dependency redefines coalition government as a continuous negotiation process, prioritizing the management of intra-coalition demands over policy-making (Budge & Laver, 1986). This results in significant governance challenges, including policy fragmentation, delays, and inefficiencies. The ruling party must consistently reconcile the interests of diverse factions, which may adversely affect its policy agenda. These settings will result in suboptimal outcomes, as indicated by the theoretical implications of the coalition governance literature, since the obstacles to collective action and coordination will impede subsequent governments from achieving long-term transformations. The dynamics in Pakistan are particularly pronounced, characterized by patronage politics and feeble institutional constraints that prioritize immediate benefits above sustainable policy results (Alavi, 1983).

Furthermore, transactional reliance encompasses not only pecuniary gains but also symbolic and strategic rewards, including political visibility, influence, and positioning during elections. The collaboration and rivalry among coalition partners guarantee the preservation of each partner's political identity. They accomplish this by participating in the government while also critiquing it (Edelman, 1987; Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2015). The two poles signify the government's response to elections. When a policy is flawed, parties seek to maximize gains from the coalition while minimizing their responsibilities. This practice exemplifies the tension between civic duty and personal survival within the political sphere, an issue of significant interest in coalition theory research. These methods also weaken alliances, damage credibility, and disregard the norms of cooperation essential for proper conduct (Waseem, 2005).

The third factor is strategic divergence and departure incentives, which help us understand how coalitions disintegrate. Coalitions are perpetually in flux, leading to heightened disparities among interests, constituencies, and policy preferences. This results in the stratification. The situation reflects not simply an ideological divide but also the complexity of political actors, particularly in places like Pakistan, where regional, ethnic, and local interests have significant influence (Mufti, et al. 2020). Theoretical homogeneity of co-coalition instability posits that heterogeneity can incite conflict, especially when institutionalized conflict resolution processes are ineffective.

Exit incentives arise when the costs of coalition membership exceed the anticipated benefits for a coalition member. The nature of these incentives is contingent upon various factors, including the availability of alternative alliances, the reluctance to implement unpopular policies, and, typically, the necessity to uphold electoral legitimacy. In Pakistan's multi-party system, defection is relatively inexpensive, making it a common and strategic practice. The rational choice hypothesis posits that cooperation diminishes when departure options are readily available, as agents continuously reassess their circumstances in a dynamic environment (Waseem, 2011, 2022).

The coalitions must be capable of shifting political costs onto others, which constitutes a crucial element of departure incentives. The parties can rectify the policy error and rebrand as an opposition party by reinforcing their position beyond the petitioning phase, potentially improving their electoral performance (Vercesi, 2016; Vinogradova & Galam, 2013). This diminishes the principle of shared accountability, which is essential in the functioning of parliamentary systems. The theoretical consequence is that a concise approach is more intrinsic to collaboration among coalition members than prolonged engagement, leading to a detrimental cycle of instability and frequent government turnover.

The aforementioned processes—opportunistic alignment, transactional reliance, and strategic divergence with exit incentives—are interrelated and mutually reinforce one another sequentially. The opportunistic alignment facilitates coalition formation by attracting individuals with diverse interests who are focused solely on short-term gains. The reliance on transactions sustains the coalition by necessitating continuous negotiation, resource exchange, and sacrifices, which may induce internal tensions. Such tensions are unsustainable and ultimately lead to the coalition's dissolution, driven by strategic drift and departure incentives. This recurring pattern exemplifies a broader theoretical assertion: the instability of a coalition arises not solely from the collapse of collaboration but also from incentive structures that prioritize individual benefits over communal goals.

The structural context of the Pakistani political system further elucidates this framework. The absence of personalized leadership, factionalism, and internal democracy, stemming from inadequate institutionalization of political parties, diminishes their capacity to provide enduring commitments. Similarly, an ambiguous network of alliances, lacking explicit agreements or enforcement mechanisms, may engender heightened uncertainty and lead to opportunistic conduct. These institutional deficiencies, along with other political economy factors such as patronage and rent-seeking, create an environment conducive to the proliferation of transactional politics.

Extra-parliamentary powers, especially within the military, pose significant concerns about coalition formation. The presence of robust non-political structures alters the incentive framework of coalition politics by providing alternative sources of support and legitimacy. In addition to their potential for realignment based on significant elements within the coalition, coalition partners also adapt to the signals from exterior participants (Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2007; Haqqani, 2005). This exacerbates the complexity of coalition politics by diminishing transparency and autonomy among political actors. This can be regarded, in principle, as an exogenous variable influencing the strategic planning of coalition partners, thereby affecting the formation and stability of coalitions.

This amalgamation of theory and conceptualism offers a comprehensive explanation for the failure of coalition administrations in Pakistan. It accomplishes this by integrating micro-level behavioral tactics with macro-level architecture. It transcends merely defining stability as its absence to investigate the underlying processes of these dynamics inside the coalition, emphasizing the elements of incentives, institutions, and externalities. The framework offers a coherent analytical structure to elucidate the persistence and dynamics of instability within Pakistan's parliamentary political institutions, characterized by opportunistic entry, transactional retention, and strategic exit in coalition politics.

The breakdown of coalitions in a political system characterized by misaligned incentives, fragile institutions, and rational individuals seeking immediate benefits is not an anomaly but the norm. This opportunistic alignment, lacking remission, transactional dependency, and strategic divergence, along with departure incentives, creates a vicious cycle of instability exacerbated by structural and extra-institutional influences. This conception contributes to the literature on coalition politics and can inform future empirical research and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing the efficacy and sustainability of coalition politics in Pakistan.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **5.1. Reasons for Choosing the Topic**

This research topic was chosen for its scholarly relevance, as coalition politics have been a characteristic of Pakistan's parliamentary system since its early years. Although from 2008 to 2024 all federal governments were multiparty alliances, a majority party prevailed in the elections. This implied that the nature of the electoral process and the dynamics of government politics had changed between 2008 and 2024. The ongoing use of the coalition arrangements is also a major problem, and the nature of political representation, negotiations, and policy coherence in Pakistan poses challenging questions. The research addresses a significant gap in the literature, primarily focusing on major parties, smaller or regional political parties, and independent candidates, often referred to as "electables". Both the regional parties and independent candidates are usually seen as critical actors in the process of coalition formation, functioning, and outcomes; therefore, they act as swing actors.

The second reason is that three different coalition governments, i.e., 2008-2013 (led by the Pakistan People's Party), 2013-2018 (led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz), and 2018-2022 (led by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf), were led by three different major political parties. This enabled a systematic comparative analysis of the impact of leadership styles, coalition management strategies, and political conditions on governance outcomes. The fact that two of these coalitions completed their constitutional terms and that the third failed to do so provided a natural point of comparison regarding why some coalitions can withstand institutional contradictions where others fail to do so, despite institutional constraints. This comparative method enhanced causal conclusions and built on general theories of coalition stability in mixed political regimes.

Finally, this is an important topic that can shed light on the workings of coalition politics and government in Pakistan. The contributions of the PPP and the PML-N governments in completing their terms or tenures, unlike the untimely disbandment of the PTI-led coalition, demonstrate a disparity in political stability within the same institutional structure. The result of this split also raises another question about the role of regional parties and independent candidates in ensuring legislative cohesion, executive decision-making, and policy continuity. Through these dynamics, the research, on one hand, contributes to the already existing literature of the issue of instability and the role of government, and, on the other hand, it provides a practical solution to the structural shortcomings of the political system of Pakistan, especially in the light of the transactional model of coalition-building and its future ramifications on the further development of institutional regimes.

### **5.2. Central Argument, Hypotheses, Case Studies, Variables, and Regional Political Parties and Electables**

#### **5.2.1. Central Argument**

We argue that regional political parties and independently-elected representatives – also known as electables – in Pakistan operate as strategic power brokers within coalition governments through a sequential logic of opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exit: they enter coalitions when political opportunities allow them to maximize electoral and office-seeking gains;

sustain their participation through continuous extraction of material and political benefits such as ministerial portfolios, development funds, and legislative influence; and preserve their leverage by maintaining a conditional commitment that enables timely withdrawal when alternative opportunities arise. This cyclical pattern of engagement, further shaped by the tacit influence of non-parliamentary actors, particularly the military establishment, allows regional parties and electables to externalize the costs of governance onto leading parties while retaining electoral flexibility and future political alignments, thereby exacerbating a perpetual political instability, weaker governance, and a general distrust of the people in democratic development in Pakistan.

### **5.2.2. Hypotheses**

Based on our main argument, we propose the following hypotheses.

- 1) Regional political parties and electables are more likely to join coalition governments when the expected electoral and office-seeking benefits exceed their independent political prospects.
- 2) The continued support of regional political parties and electables within coalition governments is positively associated with their access to material and political benefits, such as ministerial portfolios, development funds, and legislative influence.
- 3) Regional political parties and electables are more likely to withdraw support from coalition governments when alternative political opportunities emerge or when expected benefits decline, thereby increasing the likelihood of coalition instability.
- 4) The strategic behavior of regional political parties and electables in coalition formation, maintenance, and exit is significantly influenced by the tacit intervention or signaling of non-parliamentary actors, particularly the military establishment.

### **5.2.3. Case Studies**

To test the proposed hypotheses, we employ a comparative qualitative analysis of three coalition governments in Pakistan formed after the restoration of democratic rule in 2008. The selected cases include the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led coalition government (2008-2013), the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PMLN)-led coalition government (2013-2018), and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led coalition government (2018-2022).

These cases are deliberately chosen as they represent consecutive democratic governments operating under similar institutional conditions, with almost similar regional parties in coalition, and similar bargaining dynamics and stability outcomes. This temporal and contextual continuity allows for a controlled comparison of how regional political parties and electables behave across different coalition environments. Most importantly, it allows us to examine coalition entry decisions (opportunistic alignment) systematically, patterns of benefit distribution and intra-coalition bargaining (transactional dependence), decisions of withdrawal, defection, or shifting alliances (strategic exits). We look at the role of non-parliamentary actors in shaping coalition behavior across all stages (external intervention) as an intervening variable. The inexorable process of coalition formation, functioning, and deformation is facilitated, supervised, and terminated by non-political forces, mainly the military establishment. Coalition politics in Pakistan cannot be fully explained by rational-choice dynamics – opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exits –

alone; it must be understood within a hybrid political context in which strategic agency operates under structural influence.

#### ***5.2.4. Variables***

Our independent variable is transactional coalition politics. We define it as a pattern of political interaction amongst the leading party of an election on the one hand, and the regional parties and independent elected members of National Assembly on the other. In this interaction, we observe coalition formation through joining leading political party in the case of independents and creating coalitions in the case of regional parties, their maintenance through various transactions in the form of provision of ministerial portfolios, development funds, and legislative agenda, and their strategic dissolution and realignment near the upcoming elections. We believe that these arrangements are transactional because they are void of ideological coherence or policy commitments.

Our study has three dependent variables – a perpetual political instability, weaker governance, and a general distrust of the people in democratic development – that require definitions. We define perpetual political instability as the recurring disruption of governing arrangements, characterized by coalition fragility, leadership discontinuity, and repeated realignment of political actors across electoral cycles. By weaker governance, we mean the limited capacity of the state to implement coherent policies, maintain administrative coordination, and deliver consistent public outcomes. Thirdly, a general distrust of the people in democratic development is defined as a widespread decline in confidence in democratic institutions and processes to produce stable governance, equitable policy outcomes, and meaningful representation, and is reflected through various surveys, parliamentary discourse, and political statements of elected representatives.

Our intervening variable in this study is the role of non-political institutional actors, particularly the military establishment. We try to see the role of the military establishment in shaping the behaviors of stakeholders (independents and regional political parties) of three coalition governments through pre- and near-poll realignments based on electoral viability, coalition making and joining the leading party in return of various incentives, and transactional bargaining. Rather than operating solely through direct intervention, the military establishment influences the broader political environment by affecting perceptions of political legitimacy, electoral competitiveness, judicial facilitations or disqualifications, and functional durability. Throughout the period – 2008-2022, we see a continuous low-scale governmental instability caused by the interference of non-political forces, especially the military establishment. We argue that coalition politics in Pakistan cannot be fully understood in isolation from this institutional context because political actors frequently swing across the isles in response to perceived overt or covert shifts in institutional support or opposition.

#### ***5.2.5. Regional Political Parties and Electables***

**Regional Political Parties:** We define regional political parties as political organizations whose electoral base, organizational structure, and policy orientation are geographically concentrated within specific provinces, sub-provincial regions, or ethnolinguistic communities, representing localized identities, interests, and grievances. They typically maintain strong influence within particular constituencies through their appeals to regional autonomy, resource distribution, identity recognition, and local governance concerns. Due to coalition politics, they emerge as kingmakers,

often securing disproportionate share in power, including ministerial portfolios, development funds for their constituencies, and influence over policy decisions affecting their regions. Their participation in coalition governments is frequently characterized by flexibility and conditional commitment, allowing them to shift alliances in response to changing political opportunities and incentive structures.

**Electables:** We define an “electable” as a political actor who exerts substantial influence over electoral outcomes within one to two National Assembly constituencies and two to three Provincial Assembly constituencies. This influence is rooted in complex socio-political structures such as family dominance in local agrarian economy, religious authority, political legacy, and cultural leadership, among others. These electables possess the capacity to secure electoral victory independent of formal affiliation with major political parties, thus aligning with leading political party following elections. This alignment is largely transactional, driven by the expectation of material and political benefits, including but not limited to ministerial portfolios, access to development funds and constituency-level projects, proximity to decision-making centers, and influence over legislative processes. Despite their participation in governing coalitions, electables often preserve a degree of political autonomy shaped by the influence of non-political power centers. Because their political legitimacy is derived primarily from local factors, party-switching or realignment does not impose any significant reputational or electoral costs on them.

### **5.3. Research Methods**

In this project, the research methods encompass two parts: data collection and data analysis. Below is a detailed description of each part.

#### ***5.3.1. Methods for Data Collection***

The research project employed two methods for collecting data: archival research and semi-structured interviews. The details of such means are outlined below.

**Archival Research:** Collection of archival data involves the identification, localization, and study of existing documentary materials at official and institutional levels in archives, as well as the acquisition of formal records. Primary sources are the most important part of archival research, and the process of locating, reading, and interpreting records in archives is conducted in an organized manner. These primary sources comprise parliamentary speeches, election results, coalition pacts, party affairs, cabinet announcements, and official letters during the period of the political measure as it occurred.

In our research project, we have records from the National Assembly Secretariat, the Election Commission, the government gazette, party archives, media archives, and court records that illustrate the process by which alliances were formed and dissolved. Data related to the elections and their results (which include party positions, the independent candidates, etc.) was acquired by accessing domestic election observation organizations (e.g., Free and Fair Election Network—FAFEN, PATTAN Development Organization, Aurat Foundation, Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency—PILDAT, and Sustainable Development Policy Institute—SDPI), official reports of state institutions (e.g., Election Commission of Pakistan—ECP and Pakistan Bureau

of Statistics—PBS), international observation missions (European Union Election Observation Mission, Commonwealth Observer Group, Asian Network for Free Elections, and United Nations Development Programme), and research and survey organizations (Gallup Pakistan, International Republican Institute, and National Democratic Institute). Information on the making, functioning, and outcome of coalitions has been obtained through archival data collection on debates in the National Assembly and newspaper cuttings from the English-language dailies of Pakistan.

**Semi-Structured Interviews:** In addition to collecting data through archival research, formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with male (n=15) and female (n=5) Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) on the subject. Each ethnic group or language of Seraiki (n=5), Punjabi (n=7), Urdu Speakers (n=3), Baloch (n=2), and Pashtuns (n=3) was represented. Four regional or smaller political parties, including the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (n=3), Pakistan Muttahidda Qaumi Movement (n=3), Balochistan National Party-Mengal (n=2), and Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (n=2), had 10 of these members, whereas 10 MNAs were independent or, as they are sometimes called, “electables.” Their identities are kept secret at their request, owing to security concerns. The interviews ranged from 42 to 91 minutes, with an average of 68 minutes. The interviews were recorded in Urdu, then translated and transcribed into English.

Not only is this an interesting research work, but it is also credible, as it draws on extensive archival research, much of the data, and useful semi-structured interviews. This contrasting set of data enabled us to make useful comparisons between various points of view and situations.

### 5.3.2. Methods for Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using directed content analysis, one of the three types of qualitative content analysis. The other two types are summative and conventional, as shown in Table 1. These types differ in their coding schemes, the sources of their codes, and their trustworthiness (Shannon & Hsieh, 2005).

*Table 1: Differences among Three Approaches of Content Analysis*

Type of Content Analysis	Study Starts With	Timing of Defining Codes or Keywords	Source of Codes or Keywords
<i>Conventional</i>	Observation	Codes are defined during data analysis	Codes are derived from data
<i>Directed</i>	Theory or Research Findings	Codes are defined before and during data analysis	Codes are derived from theory or relevant research findings
<i>Summative</i>	Keywords	Keywords are identified before and during data analysis	Keywords are derived from the interests of researchers or a review of the literature

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

The table compares the three main types of content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative. It focuses on how they start, when they introduce codes or keywords, and where these codes come from. In conventional content analysis, the research begins with direct observation, and the codes are inductively generated during data analysis, meaning they are derived from the data itself (Mayring, 2021). Directed content analysis, on the other hand, is more structured and begins with a

theory or prior research results (Schreier, 2012). In this case, the process identifies codes both before and during the analysis, and these codes are mostly grounded in existing theories or literature. In the meantime, summative content analysis involves identifying and counting keywords (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). These keywords are chosen in advance and during analysis, based on what the researcher is interested in or has found in previous literature. The table shows a general trend from the inductive (conventional) approach to the deductive and theory-oriented (directed) approach, and finally to the keyword analytical (summative) approach.

The directed approach to content analysis commences the research study with an established theory or prior research findings, aiming to refute, validate, or expand upon them. This method can be categorized as a deductive application of theoretical concepts or research findings (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). The current theoretical framework or research findings can yield predictions about the variables of interest or their correlations. In this way, it helps establish the first coding framework or identify connections between codes (Mayring, 2021). In this manner, researchers commence their investigations with principal theories or variables as foundational codes (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Directed content analysis results may present a contradictory representation of the phenomenon or may enhance, elaborate on, and enrich the theory or research (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Therefore, this research project tests (verify, nullify, or complement) Mohammad Waseem's findings, which posit that the military establishment is pivotal to the formation and dissolution of coalition governments in Pakistan. He asserts, "The making and breaking of coalition arrangements in the center and provinces convinced the civil and military officers that the parliamentary form of government was unsuitable for Pakistan" (Waseem, 2022). Substantiating his claim of the key role of the military establishment in the making, functioning, and breaking of the coalition governments in Pakistan, he further adds

The establishment, led by the bureaucracy at that time and the army after 1958, exercised an enormous capacity and finesse in creating factions, sometimes comprising a majority of the Muslim League's erstwhile legislators, as happened after the passage of the 1956 Constitution and again during the 2002 elections. Similarly, 18 members of the Balochistan Assembly from the PML-N abandoned their party in 2017 and formed a coalition government with the opposition. These mass defections were brought about, respectively, by President (General) Iskandar Mirza, President (General) Musharraf, and, allegedly, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). When the PML-N formed the government in Lahore after the 2008 elections, and later in both Islamabad and Lahore after the 2013 elections, its leader Nawaz Sharif accommodated yesterday's turncoats back into the party. In other words, the Muslim League's electables and legislators trafficked between the civilian-led and military-led factions with great ease (Waseem, 2022).

#### **5.4. Limitations of the Research Study**

This research study has a few key limitations that were taken into consideration when interpreting the results. First, the research project studies only federal-level coalition governments, implying it does not examine the workings of coalitions at the provincial level, where political arrangements,

party alignments, and governance considerations are highly disparate due to the provincial nature of politics. Such exclusion limits analytical breadth and can lead to a poor understanding of the forces shaping the politics of coalitions in Pakistan's multi-tiered federal system. Second, semi-structured interviews, one of the data collection methods, are limited by the sample's insufficient representativeness, as not every ethnic and language group was adequately represented in the research. The absence of the groups, including Sindhis and Hazaras, raises the possibility of bias and reduces the inclusiveness and generalizability of results, especially in a context where ethnicity plays a significant role in voter turnout and coalition differentiation. Third, the research covers only the formation of a coalition government between 2008 and 2024, and as such, it does not draw on historical examples of coalition politics since 1947. Such a type of selective periodization may overlook vital issues such as long-term trends, institutional change, and past experiences, which are essential to a more detailed explanation of why political instability and a lack of governance persist in Pakistan. All these drawbacks indicate that the study can be valuable; nevertheless, we exercised caution in applying the results and using them only in the future, when more inclusive, representative, and long-term studies are conducted.

## DATA FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

### 6.1. Elections and Coalitions

Our data for this study include national assembly proceedings from 2008-2022. We conducted interviews with former MNAs elected as independent members of the parliament and later on joined the leading political party of the assembly, and the members of regional political parties. Additionally, we did content analysis of newspaper clippings, particularly Urdu Newspapers Express which is available online since 2009, to identify patterns, themes, and underlying power structures of the coalition politics in Pakistan during the time of our focus (Shafqat, 1998).<sup>3</sup>

The 2008, 2013, and 2018 general elections consistently produced fragmented parliamentary structures in which no single political party secured an outright majority in the National Assembly (Strøm, 1990; Shah, 2019a). The formation of governments in all three instances required post-election alignments involving independent candidates and smaller regional parties. These alignments are not only visible in electoral data but are also explicitly acknowledged in parliamentary proceedings and contemporaneous newspaper reporting.

The following table shows the post-election party standing before and after the joining of independent candidates and the allocation of reserved seats.

*Table 2: post-election Party Standing before and after the Joining of Independent Candidates*

Election	Party	General Seats Won	Independents Joined	General Total after Joining	Reserved Seats (Women + Minorities)	Final Total Seats
<b>2008</b>	PPP	89	0.636364	96	+27 (23 women, 4 minority)	125
	PML-N	68	0.363636	72	+20 (17 women, 3 minority)	91
	PML-Q	42	—	42	+12 (10 women, 2 minority)	54
	MQM	19	—	19	+6 (5 women, 1 minority)	25
	ANP	10	—	10	+3 (3 women)	13
<b>2013</b>	PML-N	126	0.703704	145	+31 (26 women, 5 minority)	176
	PPP	31		31	+8 (7 women, 1 minority)	39
	PTI	28		28	+7 (6 women, 1 minority)	35
	MQM	18		18	+5 (4 women, 1 minority)	23
	JUI-F	10		10	+5 (4 women, 1 minority)	15
<b>2018</b>	PTI	116	0.692308	125	+33 (28 women, 5 minority)	158
	PML-N	64		64	+18 (16 women, 2 minority)	82
	PPP	42		42	+11 (9 women, 2 minority)	53
	MMA	12		12	+3 (2 women, 1 minority)	15
	MQM-P	6		6	+1 (1 woman)	7

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

<sup>3</sup> On the use of parliamentary proceedings and newspaper archives to study coalition politics in Pakistan, see Shah (2014).

The 2008 elections resulted in the PPP emerging as the largest party without a majority, requiring the formation of a coalition government. Riding on a wave of sympathy in the wake of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, the PPP secured 88 general seats and subsequently formed the government under Yousuf Raza Gillani (*Dawn*, 2024). Parliamentary debates from early sessions reflect a recognition of this dependence, with members noting that the House would function through cooperation among coalition partners representing different parties and regions (Back et al., 2011). Simultaneously, opposition members raised concerns that reliance on coalition partners would shape legislative outcomes and policy direction. Newspaper reporting from the immediate post-election period provides additional detail on the role of independent candidates. Reports described a steady movement of independent MNAs toward the ruling benches following consultations, indicating that these alignments were not incidental but occurred through structured political negotiations facilitated by the ambiance provided by the military establishment that, after the untimely assassination of Benazir Bhutto, was pushed on the backfoot (Waseem, 2022; Cohen, 2004). The presence of approximately eleven independents, seven of whom aligned with the PPP, expanded the government's parliamentary base beyond its electoral strength.

The 2013 elections produced a comparatively stronger showing for the PML-N, particularly in the Punjab. However, despite its numerical advantage, the party was short of securing a majority on its own, thus in need of inclusion of independent members. A total of 19 out of 27 members joined PMLN which helped it save an additional 4 reserved seats, thus bringing its total number to 176. Even though it made PMLN secure a comfortable majority in the parliament, its dependence on coalition partners remained visible in consolidating the ruling party's position, thus creating a low-scale instability in national politics. Many of these members had been associated with PPP's government in 2008-13 tenure. After contesting and winning elections as independent, these lawmakers joined PMLN but maintained their independent position; some of them broke away to create a new Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) while some others resigned from assembly, created a new group of Southern Punjab, thus showing a pre-election realignment (Shahid, 2018).

The 2018 elections once again produced a plurality outcome with PTI forming government through coalition arrangements (Shah, 2019b). A total of 13 members were elected as independent and 9 of them joined PTI while 4 remained independent. Had those four independent members joined PTI, the party could have secured two more reserved and minority seats, thereby becoming much less reliant on coalition partners. Absent it, the role of small regional parties such as MQM and independents could have been less manipulative in parliamentary proceedings. In assembly debates, coalition partners such as MQM, PMLQ, and BAP, despite their limited seat share, were repeatedly referenced as part of the governing arrangement. This amalgamation of several actors put in the treasury benches to create a majority resulted in an inherently unstable government which could not stand a challenge of no-confidence in April 2022, primarily thanks to a group of PTI's own members who had joined it in pre-election realignment phase in 2018 (Chaudhry, 2022; European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2023). Reporting from the period also highlights issues between coalition partners and the leadership on ministerial portfolios, development funds, legislative agendas, and regional concerns, indicating that coalition formation in 2018 followed a similar structure to earlier periods, involving post-election alignments and negotiations.

## 6.2. Interviews of Electables and Regional Party MNAs

To gain first-hand information and insight, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with members of the National Assemblies during 2008-13, 2013-18, and 2018-23. They included fifteen representatives from regional political parties and five independent electables. As the table shows, these interviews provide a robust empirical support for our theoretical framework such as pre-election realignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exit. Though they found some convergence on pragmatic interests such as resolving governance issues arising due to energy crisis, inflation, unemployment, and others, a significant majority of respondents explicitly framed their decision to join coalition governments not as a function of ideological convergence but rather a calculated strategy to secure access to material resources, including development funds, ministerial portfolios, and bureaucratic decision making at the constituency- or regional-level. Almost all respondents characterized coalition maintenance as a continuous process of renegotiation of give-and-take, describing support as contingent upon sustained distribution of benefits. Importantly, the interviews also highlighted the intervening role of the military establishment and other institutions. About 14 respondents acknowledged that judicial disqualifications of Prime Ministers Gillani in 2012 and Sharif in 2017 fundamentally altered coalition stability. Our 15 respondents explicitly referenced the military establishment's posture, particularly its perceived shift toward 'neutrality' prior to the 2022 no-confidence vote, as a decisive signal prompting strategic realignment. It confirms that non-political forces operate as intervening variables shaping the timing and direction of coalition behavior. Finally, 17 respondents described their own defections or those of their colleagues as exercises in political survival rather than breaches of trust and as a need of future political interests. This consistent pattern of withdrawal validates that coalition instability in Pakistan is an embedded feature of a political system wherein regional parties and electables continuously recalibrate their alignments in response to shifting opportunities, policy grievances, and external institutional pressures. Put together, our findings from these interviews corroborate the instability model presented in this study.

*Table 3: MNAs on Coalition Politics*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Quotations	Analytical Interpretation
<b>Motivations for Joining Govt</b>	Access Over Ideology	<i>"Look, ideology is for the street or the media. I joined the PPP government to secure development funds for my constituency. That is how we get re-elected."</i> (Electable, 2008-13 Assembly) <i>"It was simple arithmetic. The leading party needed our votes to cross the halfway mark. We asked for the ministries important to us. It was a straight trade."</i> (Regional Party MNA, 2008-13 Assembly)	Confirms H1. Alignment is a strategic calculation of resource access, not programmatic fit. This validates the "Opportunistic Alignment" phase where material incentives outweigh party platforms.
<b>Bargaining &amp; Govt Maintenance</b>	<i>Continuous Bargaining</i>	<i>Support is not a one-time cheque. It is a daily ATM. We had to keep going to the PM to remind him of people's issues and our need of development funds."</i> (Electable turned Minister, 2013-18 Assembly) <i>"Every few months, there would be a 'trust deficit' in the media. That was our signal to renegotiate our</i>	<b>Confirms H2.</b> The fragility of the government requires constant "transactional maintenance." This supports the study's claim that coalition survival depends on continuous

Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Quotations	Analytical Interpretation
		<i>share in the government.</i> " (MNA, MQM, 2008-13 Assembly)	distribution of benefits, not shared governance goals.
<b>Institutional Pressure</b>	War of Survival	<i>"After the Panama Papers, the mood changed. People started looking at the Chief Justice's bench to see which way the wind was blowing. You could feel the ground shifting under Nawaz Sharif's feet."</i> (PMLN MNA, 2013-18 Assembly) <i>"Disqualification is a sword hanging over every minister. It makes you weak. You cannot take a tough decision if you think the court will throw you out tomorrow."</i> (PPP MNA, 2008-13 Assembly)	<b>Confirms H4:</b> Institutional actors (such as judiciary and National Accountability Bureau) act as "game changers," altering the stability of alliances independent of parliamentary arithmetic.
<b>Role of Establishment</b>	Power of the Dictation	<i>"We have to read between the lines. When the establishment says it is 'neutral,' it means they have withdrawn their support from the sitting government. In 2022, when that happened, people started leaving the PTI."</i> (PTI MNA, 2018-23 Assembly) <i>"You cannot survive if you are on one page and the other institution is on another page. On our part, we kept our channels open with the GHQ during the no-confidence motion. When they signaled, we had to shift our support."</i> (Coalition Partner, 2018-23 Assembly)	<b>Confirms H4:</b> The "Intervention" variable is critical. The support of establishment or its withdrawal dictates the strategic exit timing of coalition partners and independent members.
<b>Instability &amp; Fragmentation</b>	Strategic Exit	<i>"A year before elections, you start looking for the next setup. In Pakistan, the ruling party looks like it's sinking, so you quietly talk to the opposition. When Nawaz Sharif was disqualified, we knew which way the vote was going to go in South Punjab."</i> (Electable, PMLN defector, 2018-23 Assembly) <i>"Was it a betrayal? No. It was survival. Imran Khan was not listening to his allies, and the establishment stopped supporting him. We thought that staying with him meant political death."</i> (PTI Coalition Partner, 2018-23 Assembly)	<b>Confirms H3:</b> This pattern confirms the cyclical nature of your framework: alignment is provisional and breaks when the costs of incumbency outweigh benefits.

Source: Authors' compilations.

### 6.3. Discourse Analysis of Assembly Debates & News Reports

We used discourse analysis of the assembly debates and proceedings to provide systematic empirical evidence that independently elected candidates and regional parties are not merely some peripheral actors in the making and unmaking of coalition governments in Pakistan. Rather, they become part of a broader mechanism of continuous political destabilization. Across three government periods, a consistent pattern emerges: there is a pre-election realignment of political actors and regional parties followed by an election that largely produces a leading party in need of help of small parties and independents to secure a majority in lieu of giving away important ministerial portfolios, leverage on institutional policies, and whose loyalty is contingent, transactional, and anticipatorily withdrawn when political costs rise.

We have identified six key themes in the assembly debates, newspapers, and other reports: opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, strategic exit, governance failure, blame attribution, and institutional mediation. Table 2 explains these themes. For each theme, it provides operational meanings and typical linguistic indicators found in debate transcripts, such as demands for ministries or references to load shedding. Most importantly, the table links each theme directly to the study’s research hypotheses (H1-H4), showing how specific debate content reveals the mechanisms of coalition formation, instability, and collapse. In essence, Table 4 serves as the coding key that transforms raw assembly debates, newspapers, and other reports into a systematic, testable evidence about Pakistan’s coalition politics.

*Table 4: Content Analysis of Assembly Debates*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Operational Meaning</b>	<b>Typical Indicators in Debates</b>	<b>Relevance to Hypotheses</b>
<b>Opportunistic alignment</b>	Actors support or join a party expected to form government.	Independents joining the leading party, regional parties joining coalition, and supporting the leading party in so-called national interest, while maintaining their own independent positions on national issues.	H1: explains coalition formation through strategic entry.
<b>Transactional dependence</b>	Coalition support is tied to continuous benefits rather than programmatic agreement.	Demands for ministries, development funds, constituency schemes, committee influence, administrative access, and legislative concessions.	H2: explains why coalitions remain unstable even after formation.
<b>Strategic exit</b>	Actors distance themselves from incumbent coalitions as elections approach or costs rise.	Criticism from allies, resignation from ministries, refusal of party tickets, shifting to opposition, abstention, or support for no-confidence.	H3: explains coalition weakening and collapse.
<b>Governance failure</b>	Debates identify failures in delivery, economy, energy, law and order, accountability, or institutional performance.	References to load shedding, inflation, unemployment, corruption, weak implementation, security failures, fiscal crisis, and public hardship.	Links coalition behavior to dependent outcomes: instability, weak governance, and distrust.
<b>Blame attribution</b>	Speakers assign responsibility for governance problems to current government, previous regimes, bureaucracy, courts, military, or foreign actors.	Treasury blaming inherited crises; opposition blaming ruling party; indirect references to establishment or institutional imbalance.	Shows how accountability is displaced and politicized.

Theme	Operational Meaning	Typical Indicators in Debates	Relevance to Hypotheses
<b>Institutional mediation / non-political forces</b>	Non-elected institutions shape incentives, alignments, and executive vulnerability.	References to civil-military relations, judicial intervention, accountability institutions, neutrality, political engineering, and establishment signals.	H4: explains how external institutional power mediates coalition cycles.

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

We also examine a critical intervening variable: institutional mediation by the military establishment. Non-elected institutions such as the superior judiciary, civil bureaucracy, and accountability bodies led by the military establishment shape incentives, alignments, and executive vulnerability. The PPP period was marked by civil-military tension after the Abbottabad Operation and the Memogate Scandal, as well as Prime Minister Gillani's disqualification from the Supreme Court. The PMLN period featured the Panama proceedings, Nawaz Sharif's disqualification, Senate realignment, and growing PTI viability. The PTI period was defined by military 'neutrality,' coalition partners shifting to opposition, and the successful no-confidence vote in April 2022. These institutional forces mediate the behavior of independents and regional parties in two ways. First, they create exogenous shocks such as disqualifications, realignments, signals from the establishment, that alter the cost-benefit calculations of political actors. Second, they provide a justification for exit: allies can frame their defection not as opportunistic but as a response to changed institutional realities. The blame can be placed on the judiciary, military, bureaucracy, or foreign actors, allowing coalition partners to exit without bearing the reputational costs of outright opportunism.

Table 3 provides quantitative evidence of how governments construct their majorities. In 2008, PPP was joined by PMLN which parted ways over judges' restoration issue. Following this withdrawal, MQM started exploiting its king-making position to accrue maximum benefits, pushing PPP to finally seek support from PML in lieu of several portfolios including Deputy Prime Minister, and a compromise over its ideological narratives related to the latter's role in Benazir Bhutto's assassination. Near the 2013 elections, independents and coalition actors began repositioning before the 2013 elections as the PPP weakened. Several PML members joined PMLN before elections and became its ticket holders. Still, a record 27 independents won elections, more than several regional parties. A total of 19 independents joined the leading party after the 2013 election, consolidating its majority through post-election incorporation. Similarly, pre-2018-election realignment of political actors and regional parties started about a year before elections. It included gradual distancing of independents in PMLN, regional parties, and several other out-of-parliament political actors, especially from the Punjab. Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) was formed, parliamentarians from Southern Punjab broke away from PMLN, and eventually joined PTI. A total of 9 out of 13 independents joined the PTI after elections, while smaller parties completed the governing coalition through what the table terms post-election incorporation. This pattern reveals a fundamental vulnerability: before elections, a movement for realignment takes place. Then, post-election coalitions around the leading party are created. The actors who complete these majorities have no electoral or programmatic investment in the government's survival. They support or join the party expected to form government precisely because it is expected to win, not because of shared policy commitments. This logic inverts the conventional assumption that coalitions form around common

agendas; in Pakistan, coalitions form around expected access to power, and the absence of prior programmatic agreement renders them chronically unstable.

*Table 5: Analytical Interpretation*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>PPP Period Evidence Pattern</b>	<b>PMLN Period Evidence Pattern</b>	<b>PTI Period Evidence Pattern</b>	<b>Analytical Interpretation</b>
<b>Pre-election alignment</b>	Independents and coalition actors began repositioning before 2013 as PPP weakened.	Electables shifted away from PMLN after Panama and before 2018, especially in South Punjab.	PTI's own coalition actors began reassessing before the 2022 no-confidence phase and later electoral cycle.	Alignment begins before elections or formal collapse, indicating anticipatory behavior.
<b>Post-election joining of leading party</b>	Independents and smaller parties joined or supported PPP after 2008 government formation.	19 of 27 independents joined PMLN after 2013, consolidating its majority.	Most 2018 independents aligned with PTI, while smaller parties completed the governing coalition.	Government majorities are constructed through post-election incorporation.
<b>Transactional bargaining</b>	MQM, ANP, JUI-F and independents negotiated support through ministries and constituency interests.	Independents and smaller allies sought access to development schemes and executive influence.	MQM-P, BAP, PML and independents used numerical leverage to bargain with PTI.	Coalition maintenance depends on repeated material and political concessions.
<b>Governance critique</b>	Opposition linked load shedding, corruption, and security failures to PPP misgovernance.	Opposition emphasized Panama, accountability, institutional imbalance, and uneven development.	Opposition and allies highlighted inflation, economic pressure, and selective accountability.	Governance failure becomes a discursive resource for opposition and a burden for allies.
<b>Strategic exit</b>	Allies increasingly distanced from PPP near 2013.	South Punjab bloc and other electables abandoned PMLN before 2018.	MQM-P, BAP and dissidents moved away from PTI before the no-confidence vote.	Exit occurs when association with incumbent government becomes politically costly.

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

The next Table 4 provides evidential validity to our theoretical framework. Hypothesis 1 (opportunistic alignment) expects actors to align with parties expected to form government, and the evidence confirms that coalitions are built through strategic entry rather than ideological coherence. Hypothesis 2 (transactional dependence) expects support to continue only while benefits are available, and the debates repeatedly mention portfolios, development funds, constituency demands, legislative concessions, and regional grievances as the terms of coalition survival. Hypothesis 3 (strategic exit) expects actors to withdraw when the governments become electorally costly, and the

evidence shows exactly this pattern across all three periods. Hypothesis 4 (institutional intervention) expects non-political forces led by the military establishment to alter incentives and timings, and the disqualifications of Gillani and Nawaz Sharif, and so-called “neutral” position of military during the last phase of PTI period, confirm this prediction. The dependent outcomes measured as instability, weak governance, and distrust emerge directly from this cycle. The parliamentary record, therefore, does not support an interpretation of coalition politics as an imperfect but functional system of power-sharing. Instead, the evidence compels the conclusion that independents and regional parties are structural mechanisms that systematically generate political fragility. They enable government formation but disable government stability. They provide majorities but prevent policy continuity. They are, in sum, the institutionalized sources of Pakistan’s recurrent cycle of coalition formation, decay, and collapse.

*Table 6: Hypotheses and their Evidence from Parliamentary Debates*

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Expected Pattern</b>	<b>Evidence from Debates and Related Data</b>	<b>Analytical Implication</b>
<b>H1: Opportunistic alignment</b>	Actors align with parties expected to form government.	Independents joined PPP after 2008; 19 of 27 independents joined PMLN after 2013; independents and allies joined PTI after 2018.	Coalitions are built through strategic entry rather than ideological coherence.
<b>H2: Transactional dependence</b>	Support continues only while benefits are available.	Debates repeatedly mention portfolios, development funds, constituency demands, legislative concessions, and regional grievances.	Coalition survival requires continuous distribution of benefits.
<b>H3: Strategic exit</b>	Actors withdraw when government becomes electorally costly.	PPP allies distanced before 2013; PMLN electables defected before 2018; PTI allies exited before no-confidence.	Exit is part of the cycle rather than an exceptional breakdown.
<b>H4: Institutional mediation</b>	Non-political forces alter incentives and timing of alignments.	Gillani and Nawaz disqualifications; military neutrality/withdrawal during PTI no-confidence; media reports of engineering and establishment signaling.	The coalition cycle is mediated by institutional power beyond parliament.
<b>Dependent outcomes</b>	Instability, weak governance, and distrust emerge from the cycle.	Debates show recurrent governance complaints, blame shifting, policy discontinuity, and legitimacy disputes.	Coalition politics contributes to political instability and weak governance performance.

*Source: Authors’ compilations.*

Using the data, we are able to find observable trends and patterns corroborating that political instability in Pakistan is not episodic but recurrent and systemic. The study shows that coalition governments led by the largest political party in the assembly and facilitated by extra-parliamentary forces, repeatedly depended on fragile parliamentary majority achieved through continuous bargaining and strategic accommodation of smaller parties and independents. Executive continuity remained vulnerable to judicial interventions, parliamentary crises, and shifting political alignments. More importantly, regional parties and independent electables kept shifting their allegiances towards emerging centers of power, thus reinforcing instability. The formation of new political blocs before elections, particularly in 2018, reflects the anticipatory nature of political realignment in

Pakistan's electoral environment. Put together, these patterns reveal a cyclical structure of instability characterized by coalition fragility, executive disruption, and strategic repositioning.

*Table 7: Perpetual Political Instability*

<b>Dimension of Instability</b>	<b>Observable Indicators</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Coalition Volatility</b>	Withdrawal and inclusion of coalition partners	PMLN's withdrawal from PPP coalition (2008); inclusion of PMLQ; MQM's repeated exits and returns; coalition withdrawals during PTI government	Coalition arrangements remained fragile and continuously renegotiated
<b>Executive Disruption</b>	Removal/disqualification of Prime Ministers	Yousaf Raza Gillani disqualification (2012); Nawaz Sharif disqualification (2017); Imran Khan removal through no-confidence vote (2022)	Executive continuity remained vulnerable to institutional and political disruption
<b>Political Realignment</b>	Switching of loyalties by independents and regional actors	Switching of parties and defections for tickets before election (2013); Southern Punjab bloc defections (2018); formation of BAP; independents joining PPP, PMLN, and PTI after elections	Political actors aligned with anticipated centers of power rather than stable party structures
<b>Pre-Election Reconfiguration</b>	Emergence of new alliances and blocs before elections	Seat adjustment arrangements (2008); electable migration before 2013 and 2018 elections; regional bloc formations	Electoral competition became shaped by strategic repositioning
<b>Parliamentary Fragility</b>	Dependence on independents and small parties	Coalition dependence in all three governments; post-election absorption of independents	Governing majorities remained contingent rather than structurally secure
<b>Institutional Intervention</b>	Judicial and extra-parliamentary influence	Judicial disqualifications; debates surrounding institutional imbalance and political engineering	Political instability extended beyond normal parliamentary competition

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

Our second dependent variable, ineffective governance, is measured through the limited capacity of the state to implement coherent policies, maintain administrative coordination, and deliver consistent public outcomes. There are two dimensions of this variable. On the one hand, we look at the introduction of legislative agenda. On the other, we look at the impact of legislative actions on the common man to see the effectiveness of the actions being taken, particularly from the perspective of socioeconomic improvement. The findings reveal that ineffective governance in Pakistan does not stem from a complete absence of legislative activity but from the persistent failure at the implementation level. The PPP-led coalition government introduced some of the most far-reaching constitutional reforms in Pakistan's democratic history, including the 18th Amendment, the 7th NFC Award, and major electoral reforms, reflecting substantial institutional effectiveness at the structural level. However, parliamentary debates and governance discussions consistently reveal concerns

regarding weak implementation capacity, bureaucratic fragmentation, and administrative inefficiency. It reduces the effectiveness of institutional actions when the masses do not see any tangible benefits. The persistence of energy shortages, inflationary pressures, and coordination failures between the federal government and the federating units indicate that constitutional restructuring did not translate into an overall better governance. Coalition dynamics further constrained good governance through bargaining over ministries, development funds, and policy influence. Therefore, whereas we fail to find support for the one dimension of institutional action, we do see only paltry improvement on the second, much less than needed. Literacy rate (up from 65% in 2008 to 73% in 2022), Child mortality rate (down from 73 to 56), poverty rate (up from 34% in 2008 to 40% in 2022), and several other indicators show low to moderate progress, thus alienating the mass from the fruits of democracy in Pakistan.

*Table 8: Ineffective Governance*

<b>Dimension of Governance</b>	<b>Observable Indicators</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Institutional Reform Capacity</b>	Constitutional restructuring and institutional redesign	18th, 19th, and 20th Constitutional Amendments; 7th NFC Award; strengthening of provincial autonomy	Coalition governments demonstrated significant institutional reform capability despite fragmentation
<b>Administrative Coordination</b>	Policy implementation and bureaucratic coordination	Parliamentary debates referenced weak implementation, inefficiency, and coordination failures	Institutional reforms were not matched by effective administrative performance
<b>Governance Outcomes</b>	Public service delivery and policy effectiveness	Persistent energy crisis, inflationary pressures, and governance complaints	Governance outcomes remained inconsistent despite policy initiatives
<b>Coalition Constraints</b>	Political bargaining affecting policy continuity	Coalition partners demanded ministries, development funds, and policy influence; MQM exits and returns	Governance became dependent upon political accommodation
<b>Security and Civilian Capacity</b>	Civilian institutional management	Reliance on military-led frameworks such as NAP and criticism of weak civilian capacity	Weak civilian structures undermined policy effectiveness
<b>Policy Continuity</b>	Stability of governance agenda	Executive disruptions, coalition crises, and judicial disqualifications	Long-term governance planning remained vulnerable to instability
<b>Welfare Responsiveness</b>	Response to economic vulnerability	Expansion of BISP; Aghaz-e-Huqooq-e-Balochistan; NFC redistribution	Governments pursued redistributive interventions despite constraints
<b>Public Accountability</b>	Confidence in implementation credibility	Parliamentary questioning of dossiers, implementation, and state credibility	Weak confidence in implementation effectiveness

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

Our third dependent variable, public distrust in democratic development, is where we find the real clue to the puzzle. Interestingly, across various surveys, we did not find any decline in the desire of democracy in Pakistan; as compared to other forms of government, representative democracy remains highly valued. However, we find public distrust in democratic development; people do not find confidence in the ability and sincerity of political leaders and processes. In other words, a

significant proportion of Pakistanis prefer democratic governance over authoritarian alternatives, they do not shy from expressing dissatisfaction with how democracy functions in practice under conditions of political instability, elite bargaining, and the interference of the military establishment in political affairs. Moreover, this perception is reflected in assembly debates where inflation, governance failures, and growing public frustration have been recurring themes, indicating that elected representatives themselves perceived declining public confidence in democratic practices. Thirdly, the political maneuvering in coalition politics produces certain tangible movements such as the strategic distancing of independents and coalition partners from ruling governments prior to elections, re-election of independents and turning coats as needed, judicial disqualifications, and the blatant management of political actors by the military establishment further reduces the centrality of people in democratic development, thus causing alienation from leaders about their electoral legitimacy and contributing into perceptions of democratic inefficacy.

*Table 9: Public Distrust in Democratic Development*

<b>Dimension of Distrust</b>	<b>Observable Indicators</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Public Confidence</b>	Trust in democratic institutions	Declining trust trends in government and parliament	Weakening confidence in democratic governance
<b>Parliamentary Discourse</b>	References to public dissatisfaction	Debates on inflation, governance failures, and public pressure	Public grievances internalized within political discourse
<b>Electoral Realignment</b>	Strategic political behavior	Electables distancing from ruling parties before elections	Political actors responding to anticipated voter dissatisfaction
<b>Coalition Exit Behavior</b>	Withdrawal from unpopular governments	Coalition exits before 2022 no-confidence vote	Declining confidence in government legitimacy
<b>Democratic Legitimacy</b>	Questions regarding electoral fairness	Narratives of political engineering and selective accountability after 2018 elections	Democratic processes increasingly contested
<b>Representative Responsiveness</b>	Adaptation to shifting public mood	Independents joining likely winners after elections	Electoral politics driven by perceived public sentiment

*Source: Authors' compilations.*

## DATA ANALYSIS

During the three national assembly tenures under consideration, we observe a continued political instability marked by non-completion of a 5-year tenure by any one Prime Minister (Jamal, 2017). The change in parliamentary leadership through extra-parliamentary means in the case of Yousuf Raza Gillani and Nawaz Sharif, and through intra-parliamentary means orchestrated by non-political forces in the case of Imran Khan exhibits the scale of structural fragility embedded within Pakistan's coalition politics and the extent to which executive continuity remains contingent upon shifting institutional and extra-institutional alignments. These tenures also reflect deeper incentive-driven dynamics in which coalition actors recalibrate their positions in response to evolving political opportunities, marked by opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exit, thus reproducing instability across successive governments (Haqqani, 2005; Siddique, 2013).

The first of our three assemblies is 2008-2013. The election was marked by the murder of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. In February 2008 elections, Pakistan Peoples' Party emerged as the leading party in the parliament and established a coalition government under Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani through a broad but inherently fragile alliance of parties brought together in the aftermath of a regime transition. While the coalition initially benefited from a shared oppositional agenda, its internal coherence was limited by divergent interests and the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for coordination and enforcement (Hussain, 2008). Within few months after its formation, PMLN left the government over the issue of restoration of judges. Over time, the government became increasingly entangled in a confrontation with the judiciary, particularly over the implementation of Supreme Court directives concerning corruption proceedings. Gillani's refusal to comply culminated in his disqualification for contempt of court in 2012. The parliament elected another Prime Minister from PPP, Raja Parwez Ashraf. As the assembly neared its end, the rifts amongst the coalition partners continued to emerge, leading MQM leaving the coalition and the government in February 2013 (Ashfaq, 2013). Moreover, FATA independents provided conditional parliamentary support in exchange for development access, while legislators from southern Punjab aligned with the PPP for patronage benefits but later shifted toward PMLN ahead of the 2013 elections, illustrating the contingent and reversible nature of their coalition behavior.

The realignment started much before the elections were announced. Rather than contesting as a unified bloc (Sarfraz, 2017), former coalition partners of the PPP including PML-N, MQM, ANP, and JUI-F entered the elections independently, showing the breakdown of governing alliances into electoral competition. In contrast to the 2008 elections where approximately 20 independently elected members remained fragmented and were incorporated into coalition arrangements in a more dispersed manner, the pre-2013 environment reflected a more structured and anticipatory realignment of political actors. Most of those independents elected in 2008 elections aligned with PMLN to participate in elections. Still, about 27 independent candidates were elected to the parliament, of which approximately 19 joined the leading party, PMLN, shortly after the elections, demonstrating a far more centralized pattern of post-election alignment. The PMLN-led government led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, appeared at the outset to represent a more centralized and stable coalition structure. Since the party had higher numerical strength in National Assembly as compared to PPP in 2008, it needed, but still required, alliances with regional parties and independent

candidates to whom it had to concede some concessions such as ministerial portfolios, development funds, and an influence on legislative agenda. The apparent stability, therefore, masked underlying dynamics consistent with transactional dependence and strategic divergence. The emergence of the Panama Papers controversy in 2016 exposed these vulnerabilities, triggering a prolonged period of judicial intervention and political contestation. Sharif's subsequent disqualification by the Supreme Court in 2017 reflected not only issues of legal accountability but also the broader structural conditions in which coalition politics operates, including the role of extra-parliamentary institutions in shaping political outcomes. The weakening of the executive following this decision intensified intra-coalition uncertainty and opposition maneuvering, as smaller allies and independently aligned actors started recalibrating their positions in anticipation of shifting political opportunities.

In April 2018, before the National Assembly dissolved, a group of PMLN-affiliated legislators and electables from Southern Punjab resigned from National Assembly, demanding the creation of a new province and marking a coordinated pre-election realignment that significantly weakened the party's regional electoral base. In next few days, the Supreme Court disqualified Nawaz Sharif from politics for life. While the PMLN defectors joined PTI in droves, and the Southern Punjab Province group merged into PTI in less than a month, the final move came on June 30 when, on the last day of the withdrawal of nomination papers, about a dozen electable candidates returned PMLN tickets and announced to contest elections as independents (Shah, 2019a). The 2018 elections produced a fragmented mandate that necessitated coalition formation. While PTI emerged as the largest party in the National Assembly, it could not secure a clear majority in the parliament, thereby requiring the support of smaller parties and independently elected members to form the government. Formed through a narrow parliamentary majority, the government lacked a stable foundation for sustained cohesion. From its inception, the coalition was characterized by continuous bargaining, limited policy coordination, and growing dissatisfaction among supporting actors. Though the government performed relatively well during the COVID pandemic, it overall fell short on establishing a stable political order. As economic pressures mounted and political polarization intensified, coalition partners recalibrated their positions in response to changing incentives and emerging opportunities for realignment. This culminated in the successful vote of no confidence in April 2022, marking the first constitutional removal of a Prime Minister through parliamentary procedure. Rather than signaling institutional maturity, however, this outcome underscores the logic of strategic exit embedded within coalition politics, where actors withdraw support when the costs of association exceed anticipated benefits.

Across these three governments, the recurring pattern of executive disruption, whether through judicial disqualification or parliamentary removal, elucidates the broader thesis of this study: coalition governance in Pakistan were shaped by sequential mechanisms of opportunistic alignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exit, operating within a structurally constrained system that privileges short-term political gains over long-term institutional stability. One, anticipating shifts in the balance of power, regional political parties and independent electables began repositioning themselves well before the formal announcement of elections. This pattern is visible across the three electoral cycles under study. The 2008 elections were shaped primarily by regime transition, institutional pressures, and broad-based opposition to military rule. The PMLQ (that later on became

PML), political party created under military regime, entered elections with support from the establishment. The electoral environment was marred by the dismissal of the judiciary, the imposition of emergency rule, and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. These developments created conditions in which political alignment was structured less around electoral opportunism and more around regime opposition and the restoration of civilian authority. In the lead-up to the 2013 elections, former coalition partners of the PPP – PMLN, MQM, ANP, and JUI-F – chose to contest independently rather than as a unified electoral alliance. Simultaneously, independent electables from the 2008 assembly, who had operated within a fragmented coalition environment, began gravitating toward more electorally viable platforms, particularly PML-N. Prior to the 2018 elections, realignment took place on a more structured and anticipatory form, shaped by shifting perceptions of political viability and access to power. Following the Panama Papers leak and the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, the weakening position of the PMLN altered the incentives for the regional parties and independently influential candidates. In the months leading up to the elections, several such actors began distancing themselves from the party, while others explored alternative affiliations or maintained flexibility by positioning themselves outside formal party structures. The public withdrawal of several Southern Punjab legislators in April 2018 reflects this phase of political repositioning, occurring alongside broader shifts in candidate alignment and party association across constituencies.

Two, in elections, these actors appear increasingly unwilling to bear the political costs associated with incumbency, particularly the legacy of policy decisions, governance failures, or corruption allegations attached to ruling coalitions. Instead, they adopt strategies that allow them to preserve electoral viability. The 2013 elections provide a clear illustration: approximately 27 independent candidates were elected to the National Assembly, of which nearly 70 percent subsequently joined the PMLN, consolidating its numerical position after the inclusion of reserved seats. This pattern becomes even more pronounced in 2018. In March 2018, a new political party named as BAP was established as a strategically assembled bloc of electables from Balochistan to topple the PMLN provincial government. In April of that year, a bloc of legislators and electables from Southern Punjab publicly distanced themselves from PMLN by resigning from the assembly, declined party tickets on the last day of withdrawal of nominations, and repositioned themselves ahead of the elections, with many ultimately aligning with the PTI. FAFEN's observation of the pre-election environment also documents widespread party-switching and shifting affiliations among political actors at the constituency level, indicating that these movements were neither isolated nor incidental but part of a broader systemic pattern. Contesting elections as independents and subsequently joining the leading party further reinforces the notion that electoral participation itself is often treated as a strategic phase within a longer process of alignment, rather than as a fixed expression of party loyalty.

Third, once in power, these same actors continue to engage in strategic behavior that contributes to ongoing political instability by frequently maintaining conditional alliances and recalibrating their positions as circumstances evolve. The PPP-led government (2008-2013) experienced repeated coalition withdrawals and re-entries by partners such as MQM and ANP, alongside fluctuating support from independents, particularly in the later phase following the disqualification of Yousuf

Raza Gillani. Similarly, during the PMLN government (2013-2018), while the party initially benefited from a more centralized alignment bolstered by the post-election incorporation of independents, assembly debates and media reporting indicate persistent tensions, especially after 2016, as actors began to distance themselves amid growing uncertainty. The PTI-led government (2018-2022) reflects these dynamics in an even more pronounced form. Despite forming government through a coalition of smaller parties and independents, it remained dependent on continuous bargaining, with coalition partners periodically expressing dissatisfaction over resource allocation, governance priorities, and political representation. These tensions intensified over time, culminating in the withdrawal of support by key allies such as MQM and BAP, the PTI members of the parliament erstwhile associated with other parties such as PMLN and PPP, and independently elected parliamentarians, resulting in an eventual vote of no confidence against Imran Khan in April 2022. Across these episodes, coalition participation appears less as a stable institutional arrangement and more as a fluid and contingent engagement, in which actors continuously evaluate the costs and benefits of alignment, contributing to cycles of instability that unfold throughout the life of the government rather than only at its formation or collapse.

Across the three governments under study, the role of non-political institutions emerges not as a constant determinant but as an intervening variable that shaped the timing, direction, and consequences of political realignments. During the PPP period (2008-2013), the civil-military confrontation was reported on several occasions, resulting in an institutional fight wherein the judiciary allied with the military establishment to push against emboldened civilian executive relying on the notion of civilian and parliament supremacy. In 2011, in the wake of killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, civilian leadership called a joint session of the parliament wherein members grilled military and intelligence leadership over the failure of national espionage system and asserted to review country's security policy. It led to the emergence of the Memogate Scandal centered on an alleged memorandum from Pakistan's ambassador to the United States seeking US support to prevent a possible military intervention in politics. Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the opposition in the parliament, took the matter to the Supreme Court where military leadership bypassed the civilian authority and submitted responses direct to the Court. Angered, Mr. Gillani publicly termed the move illegal and unconstitutional (Kayani, 2022). The institutional confrontation did not last long; Mr. Gillani was disqualified as public representative in June 2012 on contempt charges for refusing to write a letter to the Swiss authorities to reopen corruption cases against President Zardari. While the legal basis of the decision lies within judicial proceedings, the broader political environment characterized by sustained civil-military tensions, institutional fragmentation, and competing centers of authority provides critical context. Parliamentary proceedings during this time show demands from legislators for explanations from military and intelligence institutions, as well as calls for greater civilian oversight of security matters (Shah, 2019b). There is a clear reflection of an attempt to bring national security into the parliamentary domain, resulting in a backlash from the military establishment and an eventual disqualification of Prime Minister.

The PPP's confrontation with the military establishment helps us contextually explain the pre-election realignment of electables under the banner of PMLN. More importantly, many independents joined the party, which increased its share in reserved seats as well. However, the 2013 elections also

reflect the rise of PTI as a credible contender. Within few months following winning elections and becoming Prime Minister for the third time, Nawaz Sharif appointed a new Army Chief General Raheel Sharif. Yet the pattern of civil-military friction that characterized the preceding PPP government persisted as disagreements over national security policy, regional diplomacy, and internal security management continued. The PTI's refusal to accept 2013 election results led to its Long March and a 129-days-long sit-in in Islamabad starting in August 2014 and ending on December 16 due to a terrorist attack on Army Public School in Peshawar where 132 students and more than 10 teachers and staff were killed. While the protest was formally framed as a challenge to electoral legitimacy of PMLN government, contemporary political discourse and media narratives frequently interpreted its scale and endurance as indicative of a widespread support from the military establishment. Soon, Panama Papers were made public, resulting in a long political marathon and culminating in the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, a move supported by an unhappy military leadership due to non-extension of tenure of the Army Chief General Raheel Sharif. As the PMLN leadership fell from choice, patterns of elite behavior began to shift. Independent electables, especially in strategically significant regions such as Southern Punjab distanced themselves from the ruling party. In January 2018, PMLN's government in Balochistan was toppled by its own dissenting members of provincial assembly. In March 2018, the province elected six independent candidates as senators with PMLN failing to secure a single seat from the province. On March 29, BAP was established and toppled PMLN's senate leadership candidature to bring in its own Sadiq Sanjrani to the position of chairmanship. In April 2018, the resignations of sitting legislators elected as independents, merging of their bloc into the PTI within a month, and certain electables returning PMLN party tickets on the last day of nominations occurred within this evolving context, thus reflecting a broader process of political engineering orchestrated by the non-political forces. On July 13, about 12 days before elections, Nawaz Sharif and his daughter were arrested on corruption charges.

By the time the 2018 general election took place, PMLN had been cornered by a variety of institutional tactics such as disqualifications through courts, imprisonments of leadership using corruption charges and cases from law enforcement agencies, and procedural denials on nomination papers. This political realignment delivered PTI an electoral victory short of majority. A report from PATTAN Development Organization claims that PTI was denied a sizeable number of seats to remain dependent upon regional parties and independents (PATTAN Development Organization, 2018). A total of 13 independents were elected, out of which 9 joined the PTI. The relatively small number of independently elected MNAs in 2018 did not diminish their political significance; rather, their post-election alignment played a decisive role in enabling government formation, reinforcing the centrality of independents as pivotal actors in coalition politics. Several regional parties – Mutahidda Qaumi Movement (MQM), Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), Grand Democratic Alliance, and Awami Muslim League Pakistan – joined the coalition to secure majority in the parliament to form the government. Securing the allegiance of independents and coalition partners, and the rapid consolidation of support in favor of PTI extended beyond electoral arithmetic into a phase of active participation lured through both material incentives and broader perceptions of institutional backing. Once in office, this dependence on a fragile coalition made the government vulnerable. The weak coalition government often needed “agencies” to help bring members to the

assembly for voting. However, the denial of transfer of DG ISI by Prime Minister Imran Khan in October 2021 ruptured the 'one page' after which the military's posture increasingly shifted toward public "neutrality," which, in practical coalition politics, meant that PTI could no longer rely on the same stabilizing pressure that had previously kept allies and legislators aligned. The military establishment's withdrawal of support was the only credible shift in variables explaining the defection of more than 20 members elected on PTI's ticket along with the regional parties switching their alliance from PTI to PMLN. Khan was removed after being deserted by coalition partners, and that opposition parties secured 174 votes in the 342-member house. MQM's formal break with the government was decisive because, once it joined the opposition, Khan effectively lost his majority. Media reports during this period frequently invoked the role of non-elected institutions in shaping the broader political environment, even though the formal mechanism of removal remained parliamentary.

Our findings across the three governments point to a recurring and structured cycle rather than isolated episodes of coalition behavior. The data consistently show that regional parties and independently elected candidates begin repositioning themselves well before elections, responding to evolving signals about political viability and upcoming shifts in the balance of power. This anticipatory phase is followed by a post-election consolidation, where newly elected independents and smaller parties gravitate toward the leading political party, enabling government formation despite fragmented mandates. Once incorporated into governing coalitions, these actors engage in continuous bargaining through seeking ministerial portfolios, development funds, and support for legislative agendas, thereby generating persistent instability within the system. As the electoral cycle progresses toward its next phase, these same actors begin distancing themselves from incumbent governments, avoiding the political costs associated with bad governance and preparing for new alignments. Across all three cases, this sequence unfolds with notable consistency, suggesting an embedded pattern of political behavior rather than contingent or episodic developments.

Within this recurring cycle, the role of the military establishment appears not as a constant or an overtly interventionist force, but as a strategic structuring presence shaping the broader environment in which these political decisions are made. The evidence from assembly debates, media reporting, and timings of coalition shifts indicates that changes in institutional signaling, whether perceived or explicit, affect the calculations of electables and smaller parties, particularly in moments of political transition. Pre-election alignments, post-election coalition formation, and eventual fragmentation all appear to occur within a context where political actors are responsive not only to electoral incentives but also to expectations regarding institutional backing or its withdrawal. In this sense, the cycle of alignment, incorporation, bargaining, and exit is not merely self-generated within the multi-party coalition systems but is mediated by a wider configuration of power that conditions its timing and direction.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate how do regional political parties and independent parliamentarians in Pakistan shape the formation, functioning, and termination of coalition governments? We found that while existing scholarship has predominantly attributed Pakistan's governance crises to military interventions, weak democratic institutions, or personalized leadership, it did lack a systemic study of the role of smaller political actors in the game of throne in Pakistan. By focusing specifically on the role of regional political parties and independently elected parliamentarians, we tried to uncover a sequential logic of coalition behavior that systematically generates political instability.

Drawing on a mixed-method research design comprising archival analysis of assembly debates, election data, and newspaper reports, as well as semi-structured interviews with twenty members of the three National Assemblies representing regional parties and independents, We have tried to present an empirical theoretical framework centered on the behavior of these actors in making and unmaking of coalition governments in Pakistan operationalized by looking at three distinct phases: opportunistic realignments, transactional support, and strategic exit. We found that coalition formation in Pakistan is driven neither by ideological considerations nor by policy consensus; it is primarily an interplay of material interests strategically calculated in terms of access to state resources, ministerial portfolios, and development funds. Once in power, coalition are formed based on who has won the most seats in National Assembly and has a go-ahead signal from the military establishment. Once in power, conditional support to the government becomes a hanging sword requiring continuous drainage of resources and perks, thus turning the preference of good governance away and subservient. As electoral cycle progresses or institutional signals shift, coalition partners start withdrawing their support to avoid the political costs of incumbency and reposition themselves for future alignments. This cyclical pattern, mediated throughout by the tacit intervention of the military establishment and the judiciary, has produced a self-perpetuating system wherein regional parties and electables externalize governance costs onto leading parties while retaining electoral flexibility.

The empirical evidence across three consecutive coalition governments consistently supports this framework. In each case, pre-election realignment began approximately one year before elections, with political actors gravitating toward new centers of power. Post-election incorporation of independents and smaller parties enabled government formation despite fragmented mandates but simultaneously embedded structural instability. The PPP period demonstrated coalition fragility through MQM's repeated exits and returns, culminating in Prime Minister Gillani's judicial disqualification in 2012. The PMLN period revealed how an apparent numerical majority masked underlying transactional dependencies, with the Panama Papers controversy and subsequent judicial disqualification of Nawaz Sharif in 2017 triggering widespread defections, particularly from Southern Punjab. The PTI period experienced the most accelerated cycle; the military establishment's shift toward 'public neutrality' in late 2021 precipitated coalition partner defections and the first successful no-confidence vote against a sitting Prime Minister in April 2022. Across all three cases, the executive remained vulnerable to extra-parliamentary forces. The consequences, as measured in the form of policy implementation, economic management, and public service delivery,

remained persistently weak despite periodic institutional reforms such as the 18th Amendment and the 7th NFC Award.

We found that political instability led to public distrust in democratic development but has not translated into rejection of democracy as a preferred system of governance. Rather, survey data and parliamentary discourse reveal a deepening disillusionment about the practice of democratic processes under conditions of elite bargaining, institutional intervention, and transactional politics. The strategic distancing of electables from unpopular governments and coming back to power with new allies, judicial disqualifications framed as accountability, and the military establishment's management of political outcomes have collectively alienated citizens from their elected representatives, eroding the legitimacy of democratic processes without diminishing popular desire for democratic governance.

The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. First, it extends rational-choice institutionalism to hybrid political regimes; we argue that whereas strategic calculations are not a devilish behavior in political bargaining, prioritizing short-term individual gains over long-term collective governance mires public trust and the stability of the system. Second, through this study, we have been able to refine existing explanations pertaining to political instability in Pakistan by shifting analytical focus from major parties to the crucial kingmaking role of regional parties and electables as structural reasons of instability. Third, we believe that our study brings in the role of non-parliamentary institutions, especially the military establishment, as intervening variable that systematically mediates the timing and direction of coalition behavior, thereby offering a more comprehensive account of coalition dynamics than conventional parliamentary-focused models.

Our study offers two policy recommendations. First and foremost, we recommend that institutional reforms should mandate that independent candidates formally declare their political party affiliation prior to general elections. Under the current framework, independent candidates contest elections without any party affiliation and, within a three-day window following the official notification of results, join a political party of their choice. This post-election incorporation mechanism facilitates opportunistic alignment because it allows electables to minimize electoral risk while retaining the option to join the likely ruling party after the outcome is known. To disrupt this cycle, the Elections Act 2017 should be amended to specify that any candidate seeking election to the National Assembly must either (a) contest on a party ticket, in which case the general seats they win accrue to that party for the purpose of reserved seat allocation, or (b) contest as a genuine independent, in which case they are permanently ineligible to join any political party for the duration of that parliamentary term and forfeit any claim to reserved seats for themselves or any party they might later join. This reform would eliminate the strategic ambiguity that currently enables electables to “wait and see” before committing to a ruling coalition.

Second, we recommend that Pakistan should transition from its existing first-past-the-post system to a mixed-member proportional representation model wherein the allocation of reserved seats should be made conditional upon a political party securing a minimum percentage of the national popular vote. Under this reform, voters would cast two ballots: a ballot for a candidate in their constituency, and a separate party ballot for a political party list at the national or provincial level. A

minimum electoral threshold of five percent of valid votes on the national party ballot, should be established; political parties failing to secure this threshold should be ineligible for the allocation of the 60 reserved seats for women and 10 reserved seats for non-Muslim minorities and be redistributed proportionally among parties crossing the threshold. This recommendation achieves four critical objectives: it reduces the effective number of parliamentary actors eligible for reserved seats; it disincentivizes the formation of compounded parliamentary leverage of electables and of small political parties; it encourages pre-electoral coalition formation among various parties; and it diminishes the transactional bargaining power of small parties in government formation. International evidence from Germany and New Zealand demonstrates that well-calibrated thresholds successfully reduce fragmentation while maintaining democratic legitimacy. By strengthening national parties of Pakistan and by reducing post-election bargaining power of independent electables and smaller regional parties, this recommendation offers a viable pathway toward more stable and effective democratic governance in Pakistan.

We understand that these recommendations must confront the central finding of this study: the military establishment operates as a persistent intervening variable that systematically circumvents formal parliamentary rules, rendering most electoral or constitutional engineering ineffective. As documented across all three coalition governments, extra-constitutional actors consistently facilitated pre-election realignments, executive disqualifications, and strategic exits by coalition partners, reiterating the fact that no reform can stabilize coalition politics so long as an unelected institution retains the authority to alter political incentives exogenously. Therefore, the most critical reform would require the subordination of the military establishment to the elected civilian authority through constitutional mechanisms: transferring political oversight of intelligence agencies to a parliamentary committee; amending Article 245 to restrict military powers in civil domains in whatsoever circumstances; imposing a statutory cooling-off period on retired officers holding civilian executive positions; banning any extension in the tenure of employment of any servant of the state; and imposing a universal civilian oversight of the national budget. We are aware of the fact that the civilian leadership has consistently proven unwilling or incapable of legislating such reforms, owing to co-optation, fear of retaliation, and the historical precedent that military intervention reliably follows any sustained assertion of civilian authority. This circular dilemma suggests that the most realistic pathway is not elite-led constitutional engineering but sustained, generational political mobilization led by civil society, overseas diaspora, and accountability journalism, to demand civilian supremacy. Absent such a conjuncture, the two recommendations remain less a practical prescription than a statement of structural necessity. Unless the military establishment's role as an intervening variable is substantively curtailed, the sequential logic of opportunistic realignment, transactional dependence, and strategic exit will continue to reproduce coalition instability regardless of how electoral laws or parliamentary thresholds are redesigned.

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