INSTITUTIONAL DECAY AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION IN A DELEGATIVE DEMOCRACY: DECONSTRUCTING POLITICAL STABILITY IN PAKISTAN, 2018–2025

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ABSTRACT
The research investigates Pakistan's institutional collapse and democratic breakdown through Guillermo O'Donnell's (1994) delegative democracy theory during 2018-2025. The Imran Khan administration which ruled from 2018 to 2022 followed by the PDM coalition that governed from 2022 to 2023 and the difficult period following the 2024 election represent a critical juncture for Pakistan's democratic progress. The research shows that political instability developed through a feedback system which started with institutional failure which caused democratic breakdown which then destroyed institutional trust from the public. The research employs qualitative document analysis together with critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how three vital democratic institutions lost their authority which resulted in Pakistan's democratic system depending on delegation instead of citizen involvement. The research determines Pakistan's position through its analysis of hybrid regimes according to Adeney (2017) and judicial dual-survivalism theory from Abbas & Patro (2024). The research indicates that democratic backsliding requires more than electoral modifications because it needs a full transformation of military-civilian relations and institutional protection systems and increased citizen participation in political activities.

KEYWORDS
Delegative Democracy, Institutional Decay, Democratic Erosion, Hybrid Regime, Pakistan, Judiciary, Election Commission, Parliament, Populism, Civil-Military Relations, Judicial Survivalism

INTRODUCTION

The Paradox of Electoral Continuity and Democratic Decline

Pakistan conducted two general elections between 2018 and 2025 while its parliament successfully removed its first sitting prime minister through a no-confidence vote in April 2022 and the country saw multiple changes in its civilian coalition governments. By procedural metrics alone, the country appeared to be consolidating its democratic gains since the 2008 transition from military rule. The period brought about the worst breakdown of Pakistani democratic institutions since Pakistan became an independent nation. The public lost confidence in vital state institutions because electoral trust fragmented into opposing partisan groups which forced the civilian executive to function under permanent outside constitutional authority interference. The research question of this paper investigates the survival factors of electoral systems because democracy has lost its fundamental principles. The democratic system of Pakistan maintained its formal structure yet its actual democratic quality declined significantly. And why did successive changes in leadership fail to arrest, or even exacerbate, the cycle of instability?

CORE CONCEPTS

Institutional Decay and Democratic Erosion

State institutions experience institutional decay when their operational independence and public trust and operational effectiveness decline through time (Fukuyama, 2014). The condition of decay exists separately from institutional absence because it occurs when official rules continue to exist but the actual execution of these rules through fair court processes and unbiased election management and effective parliamentary oversight becomes weaker. The main indicators which show judicial independence decline consist of political interference in judicial selection processes and declining public confidence and when other branches of government start to control judicial authority and when internal professional standards within the judiciary collapse. Democratic Erosion (or backsliding) refers to the progressive deterioration of democratic institutions which eventually leads to their complete destruction of democratic principles (Bermeo, 2016). The process of erosion in this case differs from traditional military coups because it involves presidential power growth and electoral system changes and reduced oversight capabilities and purposeful attacks on institutions that monitor government activities. The process of institutional deterioration creates a cycle where institutions which lose their strength become unable to stop presidential authority expansion while presidential authority expansion leads to institutional degradation.

ARGUMENTATIVE CONTRIBUTION

The research established three fundamental results which together form a complete framework. *First,* the political instability which occurred in Pakistan between 2018 and 2025 existed as an ongoing structural problem rather than a brief occasional event. The system developed through a continuous process which combined institutional breakdown with democratic breakdown to create a system which reinforced itself. The democratic stabilization process suffered

because successive governments from both civilian and caretaker administrations worked to eliminate institutional controls which they used for achieving immediate political advantages. The democratic stabilization process suffered because successive governments from both civilian and caretaker administrations worked to eliminate institutional controls which they used for achieving immediate political advantages.

Second, the PTI government of Pakistan from 2018 to 2022 together with its subsequent period demonstrates O'Donnell's (1994) delegative democracy model which allows leaders to rule by their perceived direct authority from winning elections. The research expands O'Donnell's framework to demonstrate that Pakistan's hybrid political system has developed delegative behavior which affects multiple leaders and parties. The research demonstrates that delegative behavior functions as a core political system element because Pakistan faces ongoing military-civilian power struggles and because opposition parties display similar delegative patterns when they gain control.

Third, the research adds new knowledge to the theoretical study of hybrid regimes (Adeney, 2017) through its analysis of Pakistan's judicial system which follows a dual-survivalist approach (Abbas & Patro, 2024) that creates a cycle of institutional protection and judicial authority while simultaneously damaging constitutional principles. The research delivers its first academic analysis of the ECP's 2024 reorganization problems which The Patriot (2025) documented and their effects on election fairness.

SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

The research investigates the time span which started with the 2018 general elections and ended at the February 2024 elections and their disputed results and continued to the ECP deadlock of 2025. It proceeds in seven sections. The theoretical framework of Section 2 shows how delegative democracy functions as a system which exists within hybrid regimes. The third section describes the research approach which uses qualitative methods. Section 4 provides a historical genealogy of institutional imbalance in Pakistan. The fifth section contains detailed analyses which demonstrate how the judiciary together with ECP and Parliament experienced deterioration in their institutions. Section 6 examines the processes which lead to democratic breakdown through three main factors which include executive control and populist communication and military involvement in political affairs. The seventh section analyzes how erosion creates negative impacts which affect both governance systems and economic stability and national defense capabilities. Section 8 describes recovery techniques for institutions along with research paths which scientists need to follow in their future investigations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM DELEGATIVE DEMOCRACY TO HYBRID REGIME

O'Donnell's Delegative Democracy: Core Tenets and Critique

The concept of Delegative Democracy (DD) was first articulated by Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) to describe a pattern of governance prevalent in many post-authoritarian societies of Latin America. The system of DD maintains democratic procedures through competitive elections and multiparty competition and universal suffrage but it simultaneously works to reduce horizontal accountability. The elected executive views victory as complete authority to rule as the national will's exclusive representative while he views all other government institutions including courts and oversight bodies as barriers to his authority.

O'Donnell (1994, p. 56) identifies five core features:

- Personalized Executive Authority: The leader claims direct, unmediated representation of the people.
- Weak Horizontal Accountability: Checks and balances are undermined or politicized.
- Vertical Accountability Confined to Elections: Elections are the sole mechanism of accountability; between elections, the executive is insulated from oversight.
- Populist and Moralized Discourse: Political competition is framed as a Manichaean struggle between "the virtuous people" and "the corrupt elite."
- Institutional Fragility: Governance depends on the leader's charisma rather than durable institutions, rendering the system inherently unstable.

The framework developed by O'Donnell faces criticism because it only studies Latin America while ignoring how military institutions as non-elected veto players affect the process of delegative outcomes. The research fills this knowledge gap through its combination of DD with existing studies about hybrid political systems.

SITUATING PAKISTAN

The Hybrid Regime Framework

Katharine Adeney (2017) provides a crucial corrective to one-dimensional classifications of Pakistan's political system . She demonstrates that Pakistan since 2008 cannot be categorized as an authoritarian regime, yet it also fails to meet the full criteria of liberal democracy. Adeney positions Pakistan through multiple dimensions which show how hybridity operates, where:

Elections are relatively free and competitive, with genuine alternation in power (PPP to PML-N in 2013; PML-N to PTI in 2018; PTI to PDM in 2022).

Opposition parties can and do win power

Yet, the military retains high authoritarian prerogatives, including informal veto power over foreign policy, security, and—critically—civilian leadership transitions .

The framework developed by Adeney solves the fundamental contradiction which runs through this research because Pakistan operates as a hybrid system

which combines democratic electoral processes with ongoing authoritarian control. The hybrid environment allows delegative democracy to operate as a natural response from civilian leaders who must operate through current institutional frameworks.

Extending the Framework: Judicial Dual-Survivalism and Electoral Authoritarianism

This paper makes two further theoretical contributions:

First, it introduces the concept of judicial dual-survivalism, drawn from Abbas and Patro's (2024) analysis of Pakistan's Supreme Court . They argue that the judiciary oscillates between:

Institutional survival: Conceding to the establishment to avoid "annihilation" or co-optation; and

Juridical survival: Protecting its constitutional credibility and public legitimacy.

The dual logic system explains why judges showed different behaviors through their 2024 decision to remove PTI's electoral symbol before they returned to analyze the Bhutto trial case. The court established military court authority over civilian matters yet it maintained its power to oversee all legal matters. The judiciary exists as a hybrid institution which combines political elements with its judicial nature to match the characteristics of its governing system.

Second, the paper engages with Schedler's (2013) concept of electoral authoritarianism to assess the ECP's performance . Schedler established seven essential criteria which help evaluate election integrity through his seven conditions for meaningful elections which include empowerment and free supply and free demand and inclusion and insulation and integrity and irreversibility. As Adeney notes, applying Schedler's dichotomous framework to Pakistan produces aporia: the country meets some conditions but grossly violates others. The paper demonstrates that hybrid systems produce aporia which should be recognized as an essential property of hybrid systems rather than a measurement defect.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method research design, combining:

Documentary analysis of primary legal and parliamentary texts;

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of political and judicial rhetoric;

Process tracing to map causal mechanisms linking institutional decay to democratic erosion.

Primary Sources

Primary sources include:

Judicial Verdicts: Supreme Court judgments in *Suo Motu Case No. 1 of 2022* (no-confidence motion), *Constitution Petition No. 5 of 2023* (Punjab elections), and *SCP Review Petition in Military Courts Case* (December 2023) .

Election Commission Reports: ECP rulings on the PTI foreign funding case (2022), the Daska by-election controversy (2021), and the 2024 election symbol case .
Parliamentary Records: National Assembly debates, legislative bills, and PILDAT performance assessments (PILDAT, 2022, 2024) .

Secondary Sources
Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journals, think tank reports, and News Archives.

Critical Discourse Analysis
CDA is applied to speeches, press conferences, and social media statements by Imran Khan, military spokespersons, and senior judges. Following Fairclough (2013), the analysis identifies:
Lexicalization: Use of delegitimizing labels ("thieves," "imported government," "Fitna");
Metaphor: Construction of politics as moral warfare;
Intertextuality: Deployment of religious and nationalist tropes to justify institutional bypass.
This approach reveals how populist discourse not only reflects but constitutes democratic erosion by normalizing anti-institutional sentiment .

HISTORICAL GENEALOGY: THE ROOTS OF INSTITUTIONAL IMBALANCE IN PAKISTAN

The Garrison State Thesis and Its Legacy
The current institutional weakness of Pakistan exists because its military sector maintains a power imbalance with its civilian institutions since the country's establishment. The book Pakistan: The Garrison State by Ishtiaq Ahmed (2013) shows how the military gained control of the government during the first half of the 1950s because the civilian politicians who ruled the country were divided and lacked strong institutions. The judiciary validated the first martial law which occurred in 1958 through the Dosso v. Federation of Pakistan case by using the doctrine of necessity as a legal justification that would become a standard practice throughout following years .
Dr. Ikramul Haq, writing in 2025, observes that "the successive civilian and military governments have failed to end socio-economic disparities, disharmony between the centre and provinces, poverty, apathy towards the less-privileged, militancy, religious and political intolerance." Crucially, he diagnoses Pakistan's malady as a "collective failure" of all ruling classes, noting that the "tragedy of Garrison State is that its de facto rulers and their cronies give a damn to the aspirations of people".

The 2008 Transition and Its Unfulfilled Promise
The 2008 elections took place following Pervez Musharraf's exit from power to establish a new political era. The first time a democratically chosen government

finished its entire four-year term (2008–2013) occurred before the 2013 election brought about the first peaceful transition of power between two civilian administrations. Adeney (2017) notes that by Schedler's criteria, Pakistan after 2008 met more conditions for electoral democracy than in any previous period .

Yet, the transition was incomplete. The 18th Amendment (2010) granted provinces control over various matters while it removed the President's power to dissolve Parliament which functioned as a protection against presidential-backed military takeovers. However, it did not address the military's extra-constitutional prerogatives, nor did it insulate the Election Commission or judiciary from political influence. The garrison state structure continued to operate as a hidden system which maintained control during the period of civilian governance.

The 2018 Election: A Contested Birth

The 2018 general election was the most controversial since 2002. Opposition parties alleged systematic pre-poll engineering by the military establishment to tilt the playing field in favor of Imran Khan's PTI . The Result Transmission System (RTS) failed to operate on election night because the ECP secretary chose to stop using a system which proved to be operational.

PILDAT president Ahmed Bilal Mehboob noted that "since the ECP never held a proper inquiry about alleged failure of the RTS, we don't really know what actually happened in 2018" . The unexplored scandal created doubts about the validity of all parliamentary activities which spanned from 2018 to 2023 and these doubts grew stronger with each passing event.

INSTITUTIONAL DECAY: EMPIRICAL CASE STUDIES (2018–2025)

THE JUDICIARY: FROM ARBITER TO ACTOR TO SURVIVALIST

The Panama Papers Legacy and Its Aftermath

The judiciary started its modern development when the Panama Papers case became public in 2017. A three-judge Supreme Court bench disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif under Article 62(1)(f)—the "sadiq and ameen" clause—for not declaring a received salary from a Dubai-based company. The court decision brought joy to anti-corruption activists yet it established judicial control over political processes because an unchosen court panel used personal ethical standards to force out the democratically chosen prime minister .

Hamid Khan (2019) explains that the Court showed an abnormal level of interest in disqualification because it did not understand that military cooperation with judicial power sharing would be impossible after they provided their special help. The institutional survivalist logic which involved working with the establishment to protect judicial authority achieved its peak during the 2018 election when the Court legitimized an election that most people believed had been tampered with.

Dual-Survivalism in Action: 2022–2024

The judicial system operated as a research location to study judicial hybridity throughout 2022 and 2024. Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri rejected the no-confidence vote against Imran Khan in April 2022 because he declared the motion unconstitutional because of foreign interference. The Supreme Court unanimously struck down Suri's ruling, declaring it void ab initio and restoring the assembly . The first evaluation demonstrated that this situation created a powerful argument which proved the dominance of parliamentary sovereignty. The Court established a new position through its decision which became effective within several months. The Punjab elections case from March 2023 resulted in a 3-2 decision which established that elections needed to take place within 90 days after the assembly lost its power to function which the court validated as a constitutional requirement. The Court established the "barest minimum deviation" standard which allows the ECP to extend election periods beyond their constitutional limits. Justice Qazi Faez Isa, in a separate note, criticized the Chief Justice's unilateral exercise of suo motu powers, warning that "the Constitution does not grant to the Chief Justice unilateral and arbitrary power to decide matters" .

The military courts case (December 2023) exposed the main obstacle which survivalists must overcome. Following the May 9 protests—the first-ever attacks on military installations by civilian protesters—the government announced trials of 102 civilians under the Army Act. The Supreme Court established that these trials violated constitutional law during their first hearing. The reformed court panel made a decision in December which allowed military courts to operate under condition of having their decisions reviewed by appeal. The PTI described the court decision as a judicial takeover which violated basic human rights of all citizens. The authors Abbas and Patro (2024) show that the judiciary discarded its legal structure because they needed to defend the military structure from its most threatening enemy for institutional preservation.

The Symbol Case and the 2024 Elections

The Supreme Court bench which included Chief Justice Isa made a decision in January 2024 to support the ECP decision which took away the cricket bat symbol from PTI because of legal process violations. The decision effectively forced PTI candidates to contest as independents, depriving the party of its reserved seats for women and minorities. The electoral rules allowed this action but it resulted in a disastrous situation because the party which received the most votes became unable to establish a government .

Public trust consequences: The 2023 International Crisis Group survey showed that 14% of Pakistanis trusted the judiciary completely but 26% lost all trust in the judicial system which marked a significant decline from the Lawyers' Movement era.

THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN: THE CREDIABILITY VACUUM

Structural Dependence and Politicized Appointments

The ECP shows signs of deterioration because it operates under a system which maintains structural dependence. The organization depends on temporary staff from provincial administrative bodies because it does not maintain its own permanent workforce. The organization needs executive approval to access its existing financial resources. The commissioner appointment process includes consultation but the 18th Amendment reforms have not eliminated executive authority which leads to potential organizational deadlocks.

The Sikandar Sultan Raja administration which ruled from 2020 to 2025 showed how the system kept getting worse. The selection process for Raja became controversial because he oversaw elections which faced multiple allegations of political bias during his time in office. The Daska fiasco (2021) and the PTI foreign funding case experienced three years of delay until the political situation became suitable for resolution.

The 2024 Elections: EMS vs. RTS Redux

The February 2024 elections were established to bring back public trust in the electoral process. The system followed the same pattern as 2018 while introducing new system problems. The caretaker government's last-minute mobile phone shutdown, ostensibly for security, disabled the ECP's Election Management System (EMS). Presiding officers were instructed to transmit Form-45 results manually, but many were "escorted" by law enforcement and remained "hostage for hours" at polling stations .

The result led to a 48-hour period where researchers could not share their findings which allowed speculative theories and partisan stories and conspiracy beliefs to spread throughout the media. Ahmed Bilal Mehboob observed: "It appeared to be a much bigger failure this time and God knows to serve what purpose".

The 2025 Reconstitution Deadlock

The ECP faced its most severe constitutional challenge during the middle of 2025. CEC Sikandar Sultan Raja and two provincial members completed their terms in January, but a provision in the 26th Amendment (2024) allowed incumbents to remain until successors were appointed—ostensibly to prevent paralysis, but effectively enabling indefinite extension .

As of July 2025, the government and opposition remained deadlocked. The Prime Minister started consultation procedures but failed to arrange a face-to-face meeting while the opposition leader asked for a parliamentary committee which the Speaker denied. The Patriot editorialized that the current deadlock served no purpose except to benefit those who wanted a weak commission instead of an independent electoral body .

Public trust: The ECP received trust from less than 8% of Pakistani citizens according to pre-2024 surveys but the 2024–2025 crises have probably reduced this number even more.

PARLIAMENT: THE HOLLOWED CATHEDRAL

Quantitative Output, Qualitative Deficit

The 15th National Assembly (2018–2023) passed 279 laws—a higher quantitative output than its predecessors. Yet, as Afzal and Khan (2025) demonstrate in their comprehensive assessment, legislative productivity is not synonymous with parliamentary effectiveness .

Key indicators of decay:

- Ordinance Raj: The PTI government promulgated 75 ordinances over five years, bypassing parliamentary scrutiny. This represented a 150% increase over the previous government's ordinance use. The succeeding PDM coalition issued only three, but this reflected political expediency (opposition control of parliament) rather than institutional commitment .
- Committee Weakness: Most legislation was passed without meaningful committee deliberation. The Standing Committee on Law and Justice, for instance, met only 14 times in three years.
- Absenteeism and Quorum: Average attendance hovered around 40%; quorum was frequently lacking, requiring the Speaker to count votes without verification.
- Floor-Crossing and Horse-Trading: Defections occurred with impunity, incentivized by ministerial office and development funds.

The No-Confidence Motion: A Procedural Success, A Normative Failure

The April 2022 vote of no-confidence which became the first successful motion of its kind in Pakistani history followed all necessary rules. The situation showed that Parliament could fulfill its constitutional duties by using its sufficient political authority. The current rules produced harmful results.

Imran Khan presented the motion as a "regime change conspiracy" which he claimed the United States and military forces had created to undermine Parliament's fundamental constitutional authority. Tens of thousands of citizens came to believe that their representatives' votes were not expressions of political will but products of foreign coercion. The democratic system faces erosion through a process where officials follow established procedures yet citizens lose confidence in these procedures.

The 2024–2025 Parliament: Fragmentation and Impasse

The February 2024 election resulted in the most divided electoral outcome which has not been seen since 2002. The PTI-backed independents won the largest number of seats but, denied party status, could not claim reserved seats. The PML-N and PPP cobbled together a coalition, but with a wafer-thin majority and deep policy divergences .

The Parliament space has evolved into a stage for symbolic battles instead of creating new laws during the period from late 2025 until now. The current legal barriers stop judicial appointment rules from moving forward through constitutional package legislation at a consistent rate. The organization lacks authority to stop executives from skipping procedures and judges from taking control of business operations.

DEMOCRATIC EROSION: MECHANISMS AND MANIFESTATIONS

Executive Dominance and the Delegative Temptation

Imran Khan ruled Pakistan as Prime Minister from 2018 until 2022 when he established the country as the perfect example of delegative governance. The way he described his opponents as "thieves" and "dacoits" and his claim to be the only one who could purify the political system and his deliberate avoidance of parliamentary rules all followed O'Donnell's model .

Yet, the delegative temptation is not confined to the PTI. The PDM coalition used its time in office to continue the same patterns of behavior which included using accountability courts to target PTI leaders and making ECP appointment decisions and fighting against parliamentary evaluation of their economic choices. The system shows a fundamental problem which goes beyond political party affiliation because leaders in hybrid regimes choose to build institutions instead of taking control of them because they understand institutions provide less political advantage.

Populist Discourse as an Erosive Force

Zia (2025) delivers the most detailed study of Imran Khan's populist communication which he places inside worldwide populist movements while creating the term Homo-Islamicus . The model uses performative piety as a dual instrument which serves to protect itself through religious speech while it uses this speech to defend its actions and eliminate both gender equality and minority rights protection.

Khan's rhetoric demonstrates several erosive mechanisms:

- Delegitimization of Opposition: By labeling all critics as corrupt or treasonous, he rendered compromise and consensus—essential democratic virtues—impossible.
- Construction of Victimhood: Post-2022, Khan's narrative of persecution transformed political defeat into moral martyrdom, incentivizing street mobilization over parliamentary politics.
- Anti-Institutional Moralization: By framing the ECP and judiciary as instruments of conspiracy, he normalized the view that institutions are inherently partisan and unworthy of trust.

The continuous exchange between parties has created permanent harm which continues to impact current situations. Once a substantial portion of the electorate believes elections are always rigged, courts are always biased, and parliament is always illegitimate, no election result can confer legitimacy on any government.

Civil-Military Relations and the Hybrid Trap

The military performed different functions throughout the 2018–2025 time frame which cannot be described through a single definition. The institution exists between the two roles of 1990s praetorian arbiter and 1999–2008 direct

ruler. The military maintains control through its unofficial veto power which it uses to select which civilian organizations it will collaborate with.
USIP (2023) documents the shifting alliance structure:
2018–2021: The "same page" era, with the military backing Khan's government.
2021–2022: Rupture, following the ISI chief appointment dispute. The military withdrew support, enabling the no-confidence motion.
2022–2023: Open confrontation, culminating in the May 9 attacks and the subsequent crackdown.
2024–2025: Consolidation under General Asim Munir, with the military maintaining distance from day-to-day governance but asserting policy control through the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC)—a hybrid civilian-military body overseeing economic policy .
Leaders need to surrender their current stance because military power surpasses civilian authority which prevents them from creating institutions which would limit military dominance and their individual power. The cycle of delegative governance thus becomes self-perpetuating.

CONSEQUENCES: GOVERNANCE, ECONOMY, AND SECURITY

Economic Decay as Institutional Decay

Pakistan's 2018–2025 economic crisis was not solely a function of external shocks (COVID-19, global inflation, 2022 floods). It was institutionally mediated.

- Policy Paralysis: The PTI government delayed approaching the IMF for 11 months due to electoral considerations, depleting reserves on populist subsidies.
- Coalition Indecision: The PDM government struggled to revive the IMF program, fearing political backlash from reversing Khan's oil subsidy scheme.
- Institutional Override: The SIFC's creation, while justified as crisis management, further displaced civilian economic decision-making into informal, unaccountable channels.
- USIP (2023) notes: "Pakistan's economic deterioration had multiple causes, but domestic politics played a major role… Costly indecision and half-hearted economic measures accelerated the deterioration, bringing Pakistan to the cusp of default" .

Security and Foreign Policy Under Institutional Stress

The TTP launched a major increase in their attacks during this time period. Security policy functioned without any oversight from democratic institutions throughout this time frame. The 2021–2022 TTP negotiations followed military orders because the civilian administration supported the peace negotiations through political means. The military started conducting cross-border airstrikes after negotiations failed while the military operated without sufficient monitoring of civilian casualties .

Foreign policy showed the same characteristics of hybridity as the other elements. Khan's 2021 assertion that Pakistan had refused US drone bases was publicly contradicted by the military. The "cyphergate" scandal became public when diplomatic cables supposedly revealed US efforts to remove Khan which domestic politicians used to attack the credibility of civilian institutions.

CONCLUSION: BREAKING THE HYBRID CYCLE

Summary of Findings

The research shows that Pakistan experienced continuous political instability from 2018 until 2025 because of fundamental institutional problems which created a persistent cycle of instability. The judiciary together with the ECP and Parliament experienced a complete breakdown which served as the fundamental cause for democratic deterioration. The institutions' weak points led to increased presidential interference which resulted in declining institutional legitimacy and decreased public confidence and more political activities outside official channels.

The vicious cycle operates as follows:

- Historical inheritance: Persistent civil-military asymmetry creates structural openings for institutional subversion.
- Delegative governance: Civilian leaders exploit these openings for short-term consolidation, bypassing checks and politicizing appointments.
- Institutional decay: Politicized institutions lose professional capacity, credibility, and public trust.
- Democratic erosion: Loss of trust delegitimizes electoral outcomes and parliamentary processes, incentivizing street politics and authoritarian appeals.
- Hybrid reproduction: The military reasserts informal veto power, and the cycle resumes with new civilian actors.

Pathways to Recovery: Beyond Electoral Reform

Reversing democratic erosion in a hybrid regime requires more than electoral reform. It demands a multi-level strategy:

1. Institutional Insulation
   Amend the 26th Amendment to provide fixed, non-extendable terms for the CEC and members.
   Grant the ECP independent budget and permanent cadre status, severing dependence on executive-controlled bureaucracy.
   Codify judicial appointment criteria to minimize discretionary chief justice power over *suo motu* jurisdiction and bench formation.
2. Parliamentary Empowerment
   Enact a Legislative Process Act requiring minimum committee review periods for all bills.
   Strengthen the opposition leader's role in appointing key accountability offices.
   Criminalize floor-crossing through a strengthened defection law.

3. Civil-Military Recalibration
   Develop parliamentary oversight mechanisms for defense and security policy, including the SIFC.
   Delimit military's role in civilian infrastructure projects through binding legislation.
   Encourage civilian political consensus to resist extra-constitutional intervention.
4. Civic and Media Empowerment
   Repeal restrictive media laws and prevent extra-judicial coercion of journalists.
   Protect digital rights and expand civic space for rights-based advocacy.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

This paper opens several avenues for future inquiry:

- Comparative hybrid regimes: Systematic comparison with Turkey, Bangladesh, and Thailand to identify common pathways of judicial and electoral decay.
- Digital authoritarianism: The role of social media and AI-generated content (e.g., Khan's "virtual speeches" from prison) in sustaining populist mobilization.
- Gender and erosion: How democratic erosion disproportionately impacts women's legislative representation and minority rights, drawing on Zia's (2025) Homo-Islamicus framework .
- Post-2024 ethnography: On-the-ground studies of how voters perceive electoral credibility and institutional trust.

Final Reflection

The period from 2018 to 2025 brought Pakistan through a difficult political time which proved essential for its democratic development. The institutions failed to function properly because the system used unregulated free practices and unofficial relationships instead of following its established protocols. According to Adeney (2017) hybrid regimes maintain their stability because they have the ability to transform into either authoritarian systems or democratic systems. The final result depends on political actors who take action and civil society organizations which activate their members and the extent to which institutions without elected officials will give up their control over civilian matters. The future of Pakistan's democratic system depends on current circumstances but it has not become impossible to achieve. The cycle of decay and erosion, while powerful, is not irreversible. The system will collapse because society will unite to recognize that democratic governance requires institutional power instead of personal control to survive.

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