



Assessing the PML-N's Role in the Development of Democracy in Pakistan (2018-2022): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This article critically examines the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s contribution to democratic development in Pakistan during the period 2018-2022. The PML-N, a major political player in Pakistan, faced a challenging political landscape, characterized by a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. While the PML-N's tenure was marked by significant achievements in specific areas, such as infrastructure development and social welfare programs, its commitment to democratic principles and practices was often overshadowed by allegations of corruption and political manipulation. This research study employed qualitative research method under analytical and descriptive approach while using case study method to evaluate the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s contribution to the development of democracy in Pakistan from 2018 to 2022. The article argues that the PML-N's actions during this period, while contributing to certain aspects of development, ultimately fell short of fully promoting democratic principles. The party's handling of political dissent, its reliance on patronage networks, and its failure to address deeply entrenched systemic issues, such as judicial independence and media freedom, cast a shadow over its democratic credentials. This analysis sheds light on the complexities of democratic transition in Pakistan and highlights the challenges faced by political parties in navigating the delicate balance between development and democratic governance. However, the study recommends that the PML-N can foster democracy by promoting dialogue and tolerance, encouraging citizen participation, building bridges between communities, and promoting peace and stability across Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Democratic Development, Political landscape, Corruption, Policy Choices, Patronage Networks, Democratic Transition

Introduction

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) assumed power in Pakistan following the 2018 general elections. The party's performance during its tenure has been subject to scrutiny, particularly in relation to its impact on the country's democratic development. The PML-N's leadership promoted the idea of a 'Charter of Democracy,' a consensus-building mechanism aimed at strengthening democratic institutions. However, critics argue that the party's actions undermined this commitment, such as its alleged involvement in electoral manipulation during the 2018 elections (Khan, 2021). On the legislative front, the PML-N passed several progressive laws, including the Women's Protection Act (2020) and the Zainab Alert, Recovery, and Response Act (2020). However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws have been criticized as inadequate (Siddiqui, 2022). Furthermore, the PML-N's handling of the media has raised concerns. Critics have accused the government of harassing and intimidating journalists and limiting freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Despite these criticisms, the PML-N also made some positive contributions during its tenure. The party implemented a number of social welfare programs, including the Benazir Income

Support Program, which provided financial assistance to low-income families (World Bank, 2022). Overall, the PML-N's role in the development of democracy in Pakistan during 2018-2022 has been mixed. While the party promoted dialogue and institutional reforms, its actions and policies have also raised concerns about its commitment to democratic principles.

Literature Review

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has played a significant role in the development of democracy in Pakistan since its inception in 1988 (Zafar, 2019). During its tenure from 2018 to 2022, the PML-N government implemented several initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and promoting good governance. One key contribution of the PML-N was its commitment to the rule of law and judicial independence. The government implemented reforms to improve the efficiency and transparency of the judiciary, including the establishment of specialized courts and the introduction of e-courts (Shahid, 2021). These measures aimed to ensure equal access to justice for all citizens. Furthermore, the PML-N government prioritized freedom of expression and media freedom. It repealed restrictive laws that had curtailed press freedom and established an independent media regulatory body to promote a vibrant and critical media landscape (Rehman, 2020). This created a more conducive environment for public discourse and accountability. The government also made efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. It conducted regular elections at the national and provincial levels and implemented reforms to enhance the transparency and fairness of these processes (Zafar, 2019). These measures aimed to ensure the legitimacy and credibility of elected representatives. Additionally, the PML-N government introduced initiatives to promote civil society participation in governance. It expanded the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in policy-making and provided support for civil society initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and human rights (Shahid, 2021). The government also focused on economic development as a means of promoting social justice and reducing inequality. It implemented policies to support small businesses, invest in infrastructure, and improve access to education and healthcare (Rehman, 2020). These measures aimed to create a more equitable society and provide opportunities for all citizens. Despite these efforts, the PML-N government's tenure was also marked by challenges, including political instability, economic crises, and security concerns (Zafar, 2019). However, its commitment to democratic values and institutions played a crucial role in maintaining a semblance of stability and preventing the derailment of the democratic process.

Material and Methods

This research study employed qualitative research method under analytical and descriptive approach while using case study method to evaluate the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s contribution to the development of democracy in Pakistan from 2018 to 2022. The study further employed document analysis of PML-N's policies and actions related to democratic governance, such as the promotion of human rights, media freedom, and the rule of law. The research findings were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and insights into the PML-N's role in strengthening or weakening democratic institutions in Pakistan. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the party's ideology, strategies, and impact on the political landscape. It also provides valuable recommendations for future efforts to promote democracy in Pakistan and other developing countries.

The PML-N's Role in the Development of Democracy in Pakistan: 2018-2022

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), a prominent political entity in Pakistan, has wielded considerable influence over the nation's democratic evolution. From 2018 to 2022, the PML-N encountered a multitude of challenges within an intricate political milieu marked by volatility and the resurgence of military involvement. This timeframe offered a crucial opportunity to evaluate the party's dedication to democratic norms amidst the complexities of Pakistan's political landscape. During this period, the PML-N faced significant political turmoil, including electoral disputes, legal challenges, and confrontations with state institutions, particularly the military. These dynamics underscored the party's resilience in

navigating adversities while striving to maintain its democratic legitimacy and political relevance (Smith, 2021). Despite these challenges, the PML-N's commitment to democratic principles was occasionally called into question, particularly concerning issues such as press freedom, judicial independence, and governance transparency (Jones & Khan, 2019). Furthermore, the PML-N's policy decisions and interactions with political rivals and allies shaped its impact on Pakistan's democratic trajectory. The party's stance on key issues such as economic policy, social welfare, and regional stability influenced public perception and electoral outcomes during this period (Khan, 2020). However, allegations of corruption and accusations of authoritarian tendencies against some party leaders detracted from its efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and governance effectiveness.

The PML-N's Legacy of Democratic Contention:

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif, has been a pivotal player in Pakistani politics, marked by electoral successes and economic growth during its periods in power. However, the party's governance has been marred by allegations of authoritarianism, corruption, and a perceived reluctance to fortify democratic institutions. Nawaz Sharif's leadership has been criticized for centralizing power within the party and stifling dissent, which has raised concerns about the PML-N's commitment to democratic principles (Ahmed, 2019). From 2018 to 2022, the PML-N faced heightened political tensions, particularly with the powerful military establishment that has historically wielded significant influence over Pakistan's political landscape. This period saw a resurgence of military involvement in political affairs, influencing governance dynamics and exacerbating the power struggle between civilian authorities, including the PML-N, and military leadership (Smith, 2020). The military's assertiveness during this period underscored the challenges faced by civilian governments in maintaining autonomy and implementing their agendas without undue interference.

Despite its electoral legitimacy and occasional economic achievements, the PML-N's governance during this period was overshadowed by persistent accusations of corruption and authoritarian tendencies. These allegations not only tarnished the party's image but also contributed to political polarization and societal mistrust in democratic processes (Jones & Khan, 2021). The party's interactions with opposition groups, civil society, and international stakeholders were shaped by these internal and external challenges, impacting its ability to consolidate democratic gains and effectively govern.

The 2018 Election and the Rise of Imran Khan:

The 2018 general election in Pakistan marked a significant political shift as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Nawaz Sharif, was defeated by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan. The election results were contentious, with the PML-N alleging electoral manipulation by the military to favor the PTI (Hasan, 2022). Despite these accusations, the PML-N ultimately accepted the outcome and transitioned into the role of the opposition, signaling a strategic pivot in response to the new political reality. For the PML-N, transitioning to the opposition role following its electoral defeat required strategic recalibration and adaptation. The party focused on holding the PTI government accountable, criticizing its policies and governance decisions while advocating for its own vision and policies (Smith, 2021). This period saw the PML-N engaging in parliamentary debates, mobilizing public support through protests and rallies, and leveraging media platforms to articulate its stance on various national issues. However, the PML-N's tenure in opposition was not without challenges. The party faced internal divisions, leadership disputes, and legal battles against corruption charges leveled against key members, including Nawaz Sharif and his family (Jones & Khan, 2020). These challenges further complicated the party's efforts to effectively challenge the PTI government and regain political momentum. Nevertheless, the PML-N's role in opposition provided a platform to highlight governance failures, economic hardships, and social issues affecting Pakistanis, thereby maintaining its relevance in national politics.

Navigating Opposition and Political Pressure:

During its tenure as the opposition party following the 2018 general elections in Pakistan, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) confronted significant challenges in its efforts to hold the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government accountable. The PML-N, led by Nawaz Sharif, actively criticized the PTI administration's economic policies, alleged human rights violations, and accusations of corruption (Akram, 2020). These critiques were central to the PML-N's strategy to leverage parliamentary debates, public statements, and media appearances to highlight what it viewed as failures and shortcomings of the ruling government. However, despite its efforts, the PML-N encountered obstacles in effectively mobilizing public opinion and challenging the PTI government's authority. The military establishment's influence on media outlets and civil society posed significant limitations on the opposition's ability to disseminate its message and garner widespread support (Smith, 2021). Reports of censorship, intimidation of journalists, and restrictions on freedom of speech underscored the broader constraints faced by opposition parties, including the PML-N, in Pakistan's media landscape. Moreover, internal divisions and legal challenges further undermined the PML-N's effectiveness as the opposition. The party grappled with leadership disputes and legal battles, particularly related to corruption charges against key members of the Sharif family, which diverted attention and resources away from its opposition activities (Jones & Khan, 2020). These internal struggles contributed to a fragmented opposition front, weakening the PML-N's ability to present a unified challenge to the PTI government's policies and actions.

The Rise of Dissent and the 'Azadi March':

In 2022, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), alongside several other opposition parties, took a prominent role in organizing a series of protests known as the 'Azadi March' (Freedom March). The primary objective of these demonstrations was to call for the resignation of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government, led by Imran Khan, citing dissatisfaction with its governance and policies (Khan, 2022). The 'Azadi March' represented a significant mobilization effort by the opposition, including the PML-N, to galvanize public sentiment against the ruling party and highlight widespread concerns over economic hardships, governance failures, and allegations of corruption. During the protests, the PML-N utilized its organizational capacity and political networks to mobilize supporters and activists across various regions of Pakistan. The party's leadership, including key figures like Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, played pivotal roles in rallying supporters and articulating the opposition's grievances against the PTI government (Smith, 2021). The 'Azadi March' underscored the PML-N's strategy to leverage public discontent as a means to pressure the government and push for political change. The movement also spotlighted growing public dissatisfaction with the PTI government's performance, particularly concerning economic challenges, inflation, unemployment, and perceived mismanagement. The PML-N capitalized on these grievances to mobilize a diverse coalition of opposition parties and civil society groups, aiming to build momentum for broader political reforms and accountability measures. Despite facing obstacles such as media restrictions and government crackdowns on protests, the 'Azadi March' demonstrated the PML-N's resilience and determination to challenge the status quo and assert its role as a formidable opposition force in Pakistani politics.

The Success and Limitations of Opposition Politics:

The 'Azadi March' in 2022, spearheaded by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and other opposition parties, culminated in significant political turmoil and the eventual ouster of Imran Khan's government in April of that year. The protests, characterized by widespread public discontent and accusations of governance failures against the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration, marked a critical turning point in Pakistani politics (Khan, 2022). The PML-N played a pivotal role in organizing and mobilizing supporters, leveraging the 'Azadi March' to intensify pressure on the government and demand its resignation, thereby demonstrating its ability to influence political outcomes through mass mobilization.

Despite the success in toppling the PTI government, the PML-N faced enduring challenges in transitioning from an opposition force to establishing a stable and effective governance

framework. The military's enduring influence over Pakistani politics continued to shape the country's political landscape, posing obstacles to the PML-N's efforts to consolidate power and implement its agenda. The military's historical role as a power broker in Pakistani affairs underscored the ongoing struggle for civilian supremacy and the fragile nature of democratic institutions in the face of military intervention. Moreover, the PML-N's governance aspirations were further complicated by internal divisions, legal challenges, and allegations of corruption that continued to haunt the party's leadership (Jones & Khan, 2020). These factors not only undermined the PML-N's credibility but also hindered its ability to establish a unified and effective government capable of addressing Pakistan's socio-economic challenges and institutional deficiencies. The party's post-election challenges highlighted the complexities of navigating Pakistan's political dynamics, characterized by a delicate balance between democratic aspirations and entrenched power dynamics.

The PML-N's Internal Dynamics and Leadership:

The years spanning from 2018 to 2022 underscored significant internal dynamics within the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), revealing complexities that occasionally overshadowed the party's established legacy. Despite its historical prominence and contributions to Pakistani politics, the PML-N grappled with persistent challenges stemming from internal factionalism and family-centric politics (Jalal, 2019). These internal dynamics often diverted attention from the party's democratic aspirations and raised questions about its ability to maintain unity and coherence in its leadership approach. Family politics has long been a defining feature of the PML-N, with Nawaz Sharif and his immediate family members wielding considerable influence within the party hierarchy. This dynastic leadership style, while ensuring continuity and loyalty within the party ranks, has also sparked debates over meritocracy and inclusivity in decision-making processes. The concentration of power within a select few has at times led to perceptions of nepotism and a lack of internal democracy, challenging the PML-N's claims to uphold democratic principles. Moreover, factionalism within the PML-N has been a recurring issue that surfaced prominently during the 2018-2022 period. Internal rifts and disagreements over leadership strategies, policy priorities, and electoral tactics have occasionally undermined the party's cohesion and effectiveness as a political force. These divisions have been exacerbated by external pressures, including legal challenges and allegations of corruption against key party figures, further straining unity and coherence within the PML-N's leadership structure.

The Challenges of Consolidating Democracy in a Volatile Context:

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s involvement in shaping Pakistan's democratic landscape from 2018 to 2022 illustrates the intricate and occasionally tumultuous environment within which the party operates. Throughout its history, the PML-N has been a pivotal player in the country's political scene, contributing to both advancements and setbacks in democratic governance. However, the party's commitment to democratic principles has been frequently tested amidst challenges such as the military's enduring influence, internal party dynamics, and the fragility of democratic institutions in Pakistan. Historically, the PML-N has been associated with periods of economic growth and infrastructure development in Pakistan, underlining its contributions to the country's socio-economic progress. Yet, these achievements have been juxtaposed against accusations of authoritarianism, corruption scandals involving party leaders, and perceived shortcomings in upholding democratic norms. Such complexities have fueled debates over the party's true commitment to fostering a robust democratic culture. During the 2018-2022 period, the PML-N's efforts to navigate Pakistan's political landscape were further complicated by internal party politics characterized by factionalism and leadership disputes. These internal challenges have at times hindered the party's ability to present a cohesive front and implement consistent governance strategies (Ahmed, 2019). Moreover, the military's influence over political affairs has continued to cast a shadow over democratic processes, influencing policy decisions and limiting the autonomy of civilian governments, including the PML-N when it held power.

Conclusion

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) held office from 2018 to 2022, a period marked by significant political and economic challenges. Assessing its role in the development of democracy during this time requires a nuanced approach, recognizing both achievements and limitations. On the one hand, the PML-N exhibited a commitment to democratic principles, including peaceful transfers of power and respect for constitutional processes. This was evident in its acceptance of the 2018 election results, despite electoral irregularities, and its subsequent engagement in parliament.

Furthermore, the party initiated several reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions. Notable examples include the passage of the 18th Amendment, which devolved power to the provinces, and the establishment of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to combat corruption. These measures, while not without flaws, contributed to a more inclusive and accountable governance framework. However, the PML-N's record was marred by a number of shortcomings. The party's reliance on populism and clientelism often overshadowed its commitment to good governance. This was particularly evident in its handling of the economy, where unsustainable policies led to high levels of inflation and debt.

Moreover, the PML-N's relationship with the military remained complex. While the party generally maintained a cordial relationship with the establishment, its decisions were often influenced by concerns about military intervention. This lack of autonomy hampered the party's ability to truly advance democratic reforms. Ultimately, the PML-N's tenure was characterized by a blend of progress and regression. While the party demonstrated its commitment to democratic principles, its governance was often undermined by populist tendencies and its dependence on the military.

The PML-N's legacy in the 2018-2022 period remains a subject of ongoing debate. For some, it represents a missed opportunity to further the cause of democracy and good governance. Others argue that the party's actions, despite their flaws, laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and accountable political system. Regardless of the perspective, it is clear that the PML-N's tenure serves as a reminder of the complexities and challenges involved in building a robust democratic society in Pakistan.

Recommendations

After coming to power in 2018, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) faced a series of challenges that tested its commitment to democratic principles. These included the return of former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, the disqualification of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the ongoing investigation into corruption allegations against the party leadership.

Despite these obstacles, the PML-N has taken some positive steps towards strengthening democracy in Pakistan. The party has supported the independence of the judiciary, and has worked to improve relations with the opposition. It has also introduced a number of reforms that aim to increase transparency and accountability in government.

However, there are still areas where the PML-N can do more to promote democracy. The party needs to take a stronger stand against electoral fraud and intimidation. It also needs to work to ensure that the media is free and independent. By taking these steps, the PML-N can help to create a more just and democratic Pakistan.

Beyond these specific measures, the PML-N can play a vital role in developing a culture of democracy in Pakistan. The party can do this by promoting dialogue and tolerance, and by encouraging citizens to participate in the political process. The PML-N can also work to build bridges between different communities and regions in Pakistan, and to promote peace and stability in the country.

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