

The Role of PML-N in Strengthening Democracy in Pakistan: A Comprehensive Analysis

Jamal Ud Din¹, Alam Sher², Asifullah³ and Zuhair Ahmad⁴

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Abstract

This research paper critically examines the role of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in strengthening democratic governance in Pakistan. Employing a qualitative methodology based on document analysis, historical review, and secondary sources such as parliamentary records, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the study highlights the PML-N's contributions to electoral continuity, constitutional reforms, and democratic transitions, including its central role in the 2006 Charter of Democracy and the peaceful power transfer in 2013. The paper finds that the PML-N played a key role in advancing legislative development, institutional reform, civil-military balance, and counterterrorism policy through initiatives like the National Action Plan. However, the research also identifies limitations, including dynastic politics, media constraints, and governance centralization. The paper concludes that despite these challenges, the PML-N has played a substantial role in promoting electoral legitimacy and institutional continuity in Pakistan's fragile democratic landscape. Policy recommendations advocate for enhanced internal party democracy, institutional transparency, and constructive inter-party cooperation.

Keywords: Democracy, Pakistan, Governance, Electoral Politics, Institutional Reform.

Introduction

Democracy in Pakistan has witnessed a challenging journey marked by repeated interruptions, fragile institutions, and power struggles between civilian and military actors. Since its independence, Pakistan has alternated between civilian democratic governments and military dictatorships, resulting in an inconsistent journey of democratic consolidation. Despite being founded on democratic principles, Pakistan's political landscape has often been characterized by weak parliamentary traditions, curtailed civil liberties, and a lack of institutional continuity. However, democratic aspirations have persisted, with electoral processes, political mobilization, and civil society activism playing critical roles in resisting authoritarian trends and advocating for representative governance (Iqbal et al., 2023).

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is one of the key players in Pakistan's political system and has been central to the country's democratic evolution. The PML was revived in 1985 under Muhammad Khan Junejo following non-party elections during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. After Zia's death in 1988, the PML split into factions. One prominent faction, led by

¹Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Govt College Daggar, Buner.

Corresponding Author Email: jamal.phdps53@iiu.edu.pk

²BS Graduate, Department of Political Science, Govt College Daggar, Buner. Email: alamsher15104@gmail.com

³BS Graduate, Department of Political Science, Govt College Daggar, Buner. Email: Asif20@gmail.com

⁴BS Graduate, Department of Political Science, Govt College Daggar, Buner. Email: zuhairahmad@gmail.com



Nawaz Sharif and Fida Muhammad Khan, allied with other right-leaning parties to form the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) and contested the 1988 and 1990 elections. Following the dismissal of Nawaz Sharif's government and the dissolution of the IJI in 1993, this group formally became the PML-N. Founded in 1993 under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N emerged as a dominant political force in opposition to the PPP and in response to shifting civil-military dynamics. Over the decades, it has formed multiple federal and provincial governments and has played a decisive role in shaping policy, economic frameworks, and political culture (Aziz, 2009). Its consistent participation in electoral politics and emphasis on constitutionalism have made it a critical case for examining the role of political parties in democratic strengthening.

The evolution of democratic politics in Pakistan has been influenced by several pivotal moments, including the restoration of civilian rule in 2008, judicial activism, electoral reforms, and increasing public demand for transparency and accountability. Within this evolving landscape, the PML-N has operated both as a ruling party and as part of the opposition, navigating political alliances, judicial scrutiny, and challenges from the military establishment. The party's political journey reflects broader tensions within Pakistan's democracy, including the struggle for civilian supremacy, institutional development, and the rule of law. Ideologically, the PML-N has positioned itself as a center-right party, advocating for economic liberalization, infrastructural development, and Islamic conservatism fused with pro-business policies. Its ideological roots trace back to the original Pakistan Muslim League and are deeply intertwined with Punjab's political elite and business classes. Over time, the party has sought to balance traditional values with demands for democratic governance, often emphasizing national development and political stability as cornerstones of its agenda (Ali, 2024).

This paper seeks to analyze the PML-N's role in shaping and strengthening democracy in Pakistan, assessing its contributions, contradictions, and impact on democratic norms, institutions, and practices. By examining its legislative performance, governance record, and engagement with democratic principles, the study aims to provide a balanced and critical understanding of the party's place in Pakistan's democratic development.

Role of PML-N in Strengthening Democracy

Electoral Politics

The PML-N has been an active and influential participant in Pakistan's democratic process since its inception. Its consistent engagement in electoral politics demonstrates the party's commitment to representative governance and institutional continuity. Beginning with the 1993 general elections, the PML-N has participated in every major electoral contest, often securing significant public mandates and forming federal or provincial governments. This regular participation underscores the party's role in legitimizing the electoral process and contributing to the country's democratic culture (Taj & Rehman, 2015).

In the 1993 general elections, held following the dismissal of both the Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto governments under Article 58-2 (b), PML-N emerged as the principal opposition force. Though the party did not secure enough seats to form a government, its participation reflected a critical commitment to electoral competition during a period of political volatility. The PML-N's engagement in these elections signified a willingness to contest democratic space through constitutional means, despite growing tensions with the military and establishment forces (Aziz, 2009).

The 1997 general elections marked a major turning point for the PML-N. Capitalizing on public dissatisfaction with the PPP-led government and riding a wave of support for its developmental

agenda, PML-N secured a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. This electoral victory enabled the party to pursue significant constitutional amendments, including the historic repeal of Article 58-2(b), which had previously allowed the President to arbitrarily dissolve the National Assembly. By curbing this anti-democratic instrument, the PML-N made a landmark contribution to democratic institutionalization, reinforcing the supremacy of elected representatives (Jaffrelot, 2015).

After the military coup in 1999 and the subsequent exile of Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N faced years of political marginalization. However, the 2008 general elections marked the party's political resurgence. Though the PPP won a plurality, PML-N's strong performance, especially in Punjab, reflected its enduring popular support. Importantly, the party chose to participate in elections under challenging conditions, including judicial manipulation and military influence, emphasizing its belief in democratic continuity. PML-N's role in the Charter of Democracy (2006), signed with the PPP, also laid the groundwork for post-2008 democratic reforms, showing a rare example of inter-party consensus for democratic advancement (Khan, 2022).

The 2013 general elections were arguably the high point of PML-N's democratic credentials. The party won a decisive victory, forming the federal government and taking power in Punjab and Balochistan. Notably, these elections marked the first peaceful transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another in Pakistan's history, a democratic milestone in which PML-N played a central role. Under Nawaz Sharif's leadership, the party emphasized infrastructural development, economic growth, and institutional stability. Despite criticism over civil-military relations and press freedom, the PML-N's democratic mandate was clear, and its electoral legitimacy strengthened Pakistan's fragile democratic norms (Shafqat, 2020).

In the 2018 general elections, Pakistan's political landscape shifted significantly. The disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, increased judicial activism, and the rise of the PTI under Imran Khan reshaped the electoral dynamics. Although the PML-N lost power at the federal level, it retained a strong base in Punjab and emerged as the leading opposition party. Its decision to accept the election results, despite alleging pre-poll rigging and interference by the military establishment, highlighted its institutional approach to democratic processes. Throughout its campaign, the party emphasized constitutionalism, judicial reforms, and respect for the electoral mandate, reinforcing its democratic stance amid political adversity. In 2020, the PML-N joined the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), an alliance of eleven opposition parties formed to challenge the government of Imran Khan. The party also played a pivotal role in the successful vote of no confidence against Imran Khan in April 2022, which led to an in-house change of government. Following the vote, PML-N leader Shahbaz Sharif was elected as the 23rd Prime Minister of Pakistan (Dawn, 2022).

In the general elections held on February 8, 2024, the PML-N staged a political comeback, regaining influence in national politics. It won a significant number of National Assembly seats and formed a coalition government under the leadership of Shahbaz Sharif. Despite internal divisions and external challenges, the party positioned itself as a symbol of continuity and governance experience. The elections took place in a highly polarized environment; nevertheless, the PML-N's disciplined participation and focus on institutional reform and economic revival enabled it to reconnect with voters. By contesting another democratic election and accepting results in key constituencies, the party reinforced its commitment to democratic norms and upheld the public mandate as the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy (The News, 2024).

Strengthening Electoral Processes and Public Mandate

Beyond participating in elections, the PML-N has also contributed to strengthening the electoral process itself. One of the party's most notable contributions was its support for the establishment and operational autonomy of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). During its 2013-2018 tenure, the PML-N backed legislative efforts to reform electoral laws, culminating in the Election Act of 2017. This comprehensive piece of legislation consolidated multiple electoral laws into a single framework, enhanced transparency, and clarified the powers and responsibilities of the ECP. Though the law faced criticism in some quarters, it represented a step forward in legal institutionalization of electoral procedures. PML-N has also promoted voter engagement and political awareness, particularly in Punjab, where the party enjoys deep-rooted support. Through mass mobilization campaigns, voter registration drives, and constituency outreach, the party has contributed to expanding democratic participation. Its electoral narrative often emphasizes the power of the vote, the legitimacy of civilian authority, and the need for transparent governance. This sustained focus on public mandate reinforces the democratic principle that sovereignty resides with the people (Khan et al., 2022).

Institutional Reforms

Institutional reform remains a cornerstone of democratic consolidation, especially in countries like Pakistan where civilian institutions have historically been undermined by military dominance and judicial complicity. The PML-N, through its governance and political strategies, has significantly contributed to the evolving relationship between key state institutions, particularly the judiciary and the military. Although its journey is marked by tensions and contradictions, the PML-N's role in strengthening civilian institutions and advocating for institutional autonomy is an essential dimension of Pakistan's democratic development (Akhtar, 2013).

Judiciary-Executive Relations

The relationship between Pakistan's judiciary and executive has long been marked by tension, often undermining democratic governance. Historically, judicial validation of military coups under the "doctrine of necessity" and instances of judicial overreach have complicated institutional balance. The PML-N has played a significant role in shaping this dynamic, shifting between confrontation and cooperation over the decades. During Nawaz Sharif's second tenure (1997-1999), the PML-N sought to assert executive dominance over the judiciary, culminating in the controversial attack on the Supreme Court during its conflict with Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah. This episode drew widespread criticism and highlighted the fragile balance between democratic authority and judicial independence (Gazdar, 2009).

However, a marked shift occurred post-2008. PML-N actively supported the Lawyers' Movement (2007-2009), advocating for the reinstatement of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and broader judicial autonomy. Nawaz Sharif's participation in the "Long March" added momentum to this cause, enhancing the party's democratic credentials and contributing to the restoration of judicial independence. From 2013 to 2018, the PML-N government pursued judicial reforms aimed at improving efficiency but faced renewed tension following the Panama Papers scandal. Nawaz Sharif's disqualification under Article 62(1-f) was perceived by the party as judicial overreach and selective accountability. Despite this, the PML-N refrained from undemocratic measures, reaffirming its commitment to constitutionalism, parliamentary supremacy and the rule of law (Ali, 2020).

Civil-Military Balance and Civilian Supremacy

The civil-military imbalance remains a major challenge to democratic consolidation in Pakistan, with the military's dominant role in policymaking and national security often overshadowing elected governments. Against this backdrop, the PML-N has consistently emphasized civilian supremacy as essential to democratic governance. Nawaz Sharif's political evolution from a military protégé under General Zia-ul-Haq to a strong proponent of civilian authority, illustrates this transformation. His second tenure witnessed a turning point, particularly after the Kargil conflict in 1999, which led to a fallout with the military and his eventual ousting by General Pervez Musharraf. This coup shaped PML-N's ideological shift toward asserting parliamentary authority over military dominance (Boquerat, 2009).

Following the 2008 elections, the PML-N emerged as a strong advocate for recalibrating civil-military relations, insisting that policy domains like foreign affairs and defense should fall under civilian jurisdiction. During its 2013-2018 government, Nawaz Sharif attempted independent foreign policy initiatives, such as improving ties with India and spearheading CPEC. However, these efforts were often undermined by military interference, culminating in the 2016 "Dawn Leaks" episode, which revealed civil-military discord and contributed to Sharif's political disqualification (Assad, 2020).

The PML-N also sought to enhance parliamentary sovereignty by advocating legislative oversight of defense spending and promoting civilian leadership in security matters. Although institutional resistance limited implementation, these initiatives reflected the party's democratic vision. From 2018 to 2022, while in opposition, the PML-N intensified its criticism of "hybrid regimes" and establishment interference. Nawaz Sharif's speeches from exile directly named military officials, challenging the status quo and fueling national debate on democratic representation (The News, 2023).

In the 2024 elections, the PML-N adopted a more pragmatic tone, while upholding the principle of civilian supremacy, it promoted institutional collaboration and consensus-building. The party's campaign emphasized restoring constitutional order, federalism, and institutional limits. Despite criticisms of political expediency, the PML-N's trajectory reflects a shift toward rule-based governance. Through its evolving approach to judiciary-executive ties and civil-military relations, the party has played a critical role in expanding democratic space and advancing constitutionalism in Pakistan (Ali, 2024).

Legislative Performance

The legislative performance of a political party serves as a concrete measure of its commitment to democratic principles and institutional development. For the PML-N, legislative engagement has been a critical aspect of its broader democratic contributions. As a leading parliamentary force in Pakistan, the PML-N has played an instrumental role in shaping legislative priorities, supporting constitutional amendments, and participating in law-making processes. Although its record has at times drawn criticism for limited innovation or political expediency, the party has also demonstrated a consistent pattern of legislative activity that affirms its belief in parliamentary democracy and legal reform (PILDAT, 2020).

Support for Democratic Laws and Constitutional Amendments

One of the most significant legislative moments in Pakistan's democratic evolution was the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. Although the amendment was passed during the PPP government, the PML-N played a critical and constructive role in its drafting and

approval. The 18th Amendment was a landmark reform that reversed many authoritarian changes imposed under military regimes, particularly those under General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf. It repealed the controversial Article 58(2-b), which had empowered the president to dissolve the National Assembly, and restored the federal parliamentary structure of the 1973 Constitution. In addition to the 18th Amendment, the PML-N has supported other democratic reforms, such as the 20th Amendment (2012), which improved the process of appointing caretaker governments and enhanced the autonomy of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). This legislation helped institutionalize electoral neutrality and fairness, addressing long-standing concerns about manipulated transitions. These reforms collectively show that PML-N, beyond party interest, contributed to national consensus on key democratic issues (Gohar et al., 2022). During its tenure from 2013 to 2018, the PML-N government also undertook various legal reforms focused on governance, accountability, and transparency. Among them was the Election Act, 2017, a comprehensive consolidation of previous electoral laws. This legislation was praised for streamlining the legal framework for elections, enhancing transparency in campaign financing, and improving voter registration processes. Although a controversial amendment to this law temporarily allowed Nawaz Sharif to head the party after disqualification, the broader legislative effort represented a significant institutional contribution.

Parliamentary Engagement and Law-Making

Parliamentary engagement is central to a democratic party's legislative credibility. The PML-N, especially during its periods in power, has sought to utilize parliamentary platforms for law-making, debate, and oversight. From 2013 to 2018, when it held a comfortable majority in the National Assembly, the party was responsible for introducing and passing a range of bills on infrastructure development, economic reforms, internal security, and public service delivery. During this period, in addition to the 136 Acts of Parliament, the NA passed 189 legislations. In the succeeding years, the NA approved the bills (table1), many of which were introduced by PML-N lawmakers. These included laws such as the Companies Act, 2017, aimed at modernizing corporate governance; the Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act, which sought to improve prosecution mechanisms; and the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017, which was pivotal for promoting transparency and citizens' access to government data. These legislative measures reflected the party's attempt to align governance with modern democratic standards and legal accountability (Habib & Rafique, 2019).

Table1: List of Bills Passed by PML-N

Years	Total no of Bills
2013-2014	11
2014-2015	08
2015-2016	50
2016-2017	57
2017-2018	63

Source: Compiled by the research scholars, April, 2025.

Moreover, The PML-N has demonstrated a consistent legislative approach to strengthen democratic governance and respond to national challenges. In response to the 2014 APS attack, it introduced the National Action Plan (NAP), amended the Anti-Terrorism Act, and supported the 21st Amendment to establish military courts controversial yet decisive actions to combat terrorism

(Dawn, 2023). Simultaneously, the party prioritized parliamentary oversight by empowering bodies like the Public Accounts Committee and actively participating in legislative debates, both in government and opposition. Its role in passing key constitutional amendments, including the 18th and 20th, and its continued reliance on parliamentary tools for reform, whether in security, economy, or governance, underscores PML-N's institutional resilience and commitment to strengthening democratic norms through legislative processes (Express, 2023).

Governance and Democratic Norms

The essence of democratic governance lies not merely in electoral participation but in how power is exercised once acquired. Good governance, accountability, transparency, media freedom, and an enabling environment for civil society are all essential components of a functioning democracy. The PML-N, through its governance in various tenures, particularly in Punjab and at the federal level, has made contributions toward institutionalizing democratic norms (Malik et al., 2023).

Accountability Mechanisms and Good Governance: The Punjab Model

The “Punjab Model” under the leadership of Shahbaz Sharif, chief minister of Punjab for over a decade has been one of the most discussed aspects of PML-N's governance performance. Shahbaz Sharif's administration focused heavily on developmental governance, infrastructure expansion, and public service delivery, earning the party both praise and criticism. The model emphasized administrative efficiency, centralized decision-making, and visible service delivery, especially in urban centers. Mega-projects such as the Metro Bus Service in Lahore, Lahore Waste Management Company, and Punjab Safe Cities Authority were presented as hallmarks of modern governance. These initiatives, while criticized by some for favoring optics over substance, helped develop public infrastructure and demonstrated a capacity for timely project execution within a democratic framework. Accountability was a central feature of this model, albeit largely internal. Shahbaz Sharif implemented performance-monitoring tools like the Punjab Performance Management Framework, regularized departmental audits, and encouraged bureaucratic discipline. The Chief Minister's Complaint Cell and open kutchcheris (public hearings) were introduced to bridge the gap between government and citizen. These measures, although not institutionalized to the degree found in the mature democracies, marked a break from typical bureaucratic apathy (Mirza et al., 2020).

At the federal level, the PML-N during its 2013-2018 tenure attempted to address governance through frameworks such as Vision 2025, focusing on economic stability, energy generation, and institutional reform. Although Vision 2025 laid out an ambitious plan, implementation remained uneven due to political instability, judicial challenges, and civil-military tensions. On the issue of accountability, the PML-N supported the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in principle but criticized it for being manipulated by the establishment to target opposition politicians. The party proposed reforms for transparency in NAB's working and called for parliamentary oversight of accountability institutions. However, when in power, the PML-N did not make significant strides in depoliticizing these bodies, reflecting a broader pattern in Pakistani politics where accountability remains more a political weapon than an impartial process (Malik et al., 2023).

Media Freedom: A Mixed Legacy

A free and independent media is indispensable for democracy. PML-N's relationship with the media has evolved from periods of confrontation to phases of cooperation, revealing a complex approach to media freedom. In its earlier tenures, especially the 1990s, the PML-N was often

accused of controlling state media and pressuring independent outlets (Mufti et al., 2020). During the 2013-2018 period, the PML-N maintained a largely cooperative posture toward media freedoms. Independent outlets were allowed to function, and critical coverage, particularly on corruption and civil-military tensions was frequent. Nawaz Sharif's government did not impose sweeping censorship or shut down media houses, in contrast to past regimes.

However, there were growing concerns over indirect pressures, including the use of government advertising as a tool of influence, defamation cases, and selective access to official information. Journalists critical of PML-N's leadership, especially during the Panama Papers scandal, reported difficulties in coverage. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) remained a controversial institution under PML-N rule. While the government promised to reform PEMRA into a truly autonomous body, little was done in practice. Media houses accused the government of interfering in PEMRA decisions, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as sit-ins by the PTI in 2014. Despite this, it must be noted that the degree of media freedom under the PML-N remained notably higher than during military-led or hybrid regimes, where overt censorship and bans became more routine. The PML-N has also advocated for digital media rights, especially when in opposition. As part of its post-2018 democratic narrative, the party has increasingly emphasized freedom of expression, condemning crackdowns on journalists and demanding legal protections for media workers (Naz, 2020).

Civil Society and Democratic Space

An active and engaged civil society is a hallmark of democratic vitality. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan have historically played crucial roles in human rights advocacy, legal reform, gender equality, and education. The PML-N's relationship with civil society has been ambivalent, supportive in principle, cautious in practice. During its various tenures, especially in Punjab, the PML-N worked with civil society in sectors like health, education, and women's empowerment. Programs such as the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), which involved private and non-profit sectors in delivering education, illustrated successful collaboration. Similarly, health initiatives involving NGOs were encouraged to expand access to maternal and child healthcare (Ali, 2020). However, the PML-N has also been criticized for limiting civil society's political space, particularly for rights-based organizations. Stringent registration laws, restrictions on foreign funding, and bureaucratic oversight of NGOs were introduced or maintained, often justified in the name of national security. These measures created a climate of uncertainty for civil society actors working on sensitive issues such as governance, gender justice, and minority rights.

In its later political narrative, particularly after 2018, the PML-N has emerged as a vocal advocate for civic freedoms. The party has condemned arbitrary NGO closures, media censorship, and the shrinking space for political dissent under subsequent governments. This evolving stance suggests a shift towards a more liberal democratic vision, driven by both ideological reflection and political necessity. PML-N's governance and approach to democratic norms presents a mixed but largely constructive legacy. Through the Punjab Model and federal development frameworks, the party demonstrated a capacity for public service delivery and administrative reform. While accountability mechanisms often lacked institutional independence, efforts to enhance bureaucratic performance and public feedback channels marked important steps toward responsive governance (Dawn, 2021).

Federalism and Provincial Autonomy

The PML-N has played a vital role in strengthening federalism and promoting provincial autonomy in Pakistan's democratic evolution. Its support for the 18th Constitutional Amendment, despite being in opposition, was pivotal in devolving key powers to the provinces by abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List, enabling provincial legislation on education, health, and local governance (The News, 2013). In power post-2013, the party upheld the 7th NFC Award to ensure equitable financial distribution, reinforcing provincial fiscal autonomy. It institutionalized the Council of Common Interests (CCI), holding regular meetings to resolve federal-provincial issues on energy, water, and education (PIPS, 2015). The PML-N also showed responsiveness to marginalized regions, supporting coalition governance in Balochistan and initiating development under CPEC to improve infrastructure and inclusion. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it respected PTI's mandate and ensured smooth financial cooperation. These efforts reflect the PML-N's commitment to an inclusive federal structure and cooperative governance rooted in democratic values (Khan, 2020).

Economic Democratization and Public Welfare

Economic democratization has been central to the PML-N's governance model, emphasizing inclusive growth and public welfare to foster democratic stability. The party's economic agenda, particularly during 2013-2018, focused on job creation through infrastructure development, energy expansion, and support for SMEs, which spurred GDP growth and urban employment (PES, 2018). It complemented market-led growth with targeted interventions like interest-free loans and vocational training for youth and marginalized groups. The PML-N also expanded welfare programs, continuing the PPP's Benazir Income Support Programme and launching the Prime Minister's Youth Program, which provided business loans, skills training, and laptops. In Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif's Sehat Sahulat Cards offered free healthcare to low-income families, later adopted at the federal level. Infrastructure mega-projects such as the Metro Bus, Orange Line, and motorways, particularly under CPEC, reduced regional disparities and visibly improved service delivery. These efforts boosted public trust in democratic institutions and highlighted governance performance as a democratic asset (Malik et al., 2023).

Role in Democratic Transitions and Political Reconciliation

The PML-N has played a pivotal role in facilitating democratic transitions and fostering political reconciliation in Pakistan, especially in the post-2008 period. A defining moment was the 2006 Charter of Democracy (CoD), signed between PML-N and PPP leaders Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto during exile. This historic agreement marked a break from the adversarial politics of the 1990s and laid the foundation for democratic cooperation, aiming to curtail military dominance, ensure judicial independence, and restore constitutional supremacy (Paracha, 2017). The CoD reflected the PML-N's readiness to prioritize democratic norms over short-term political advantage, establishing a commitment to collective civilian leadership and mutual non-interference in governance.

After the 2008 elections, the PML-N continued this cooperative spirit by acting as a constructive opposition to the PPP-led government. Despite political rivalry, it supported key democratic reforms such as the 18th Amendment, the NFC Award, and national security policies. The party's participation in legislative processes helped build a culture of parliamentary consensus essential for democratic consolidation. This pragmatic collaboration contributed to Pakistan's transition from military-influenced governance to a more inclusive political order. The PML-N's

commitment to stability was further demonstrated during the 2014 PTI-PAT protests, when it avoided harsh crackdowns, instead opting for political dialogue, parliamentary engagement, and allowing the military to mediate as a neutral facilitator (The News, 2017). This averted a potential democratic breakdown and reinforced the importance of institutional mechanisms. Even during severe confrontations with the military, particularly in 1999 and 2016-2018, the PML-N largely chose political avenues over radical responses. After Nawaz Sharif's disqualification, the party stayed within constitutional bounds, continuing to engage through parliamentary channels. The PML-N's approach emphasizing dialogue, institutional continuity, and political compromise has been central to stabilizing Pakistan's fragile democratic system (Shafqat, 2020).

Role in Counterterrorism and National Security Policy

The PML-N played a decisive role in shaping Pakistan's counterterrorism and national security policy, especially during its 2013-2018 tenure. In response to a surge in militant violence, most notably the APS Peshawar attack in December 2014, the PML-N government, in collaboration with political and military leadership, initiated the National Action Plan (NAP). NAP was a 20-point strategy aimed at eliminating terrorism, regulating madrassas, curbing hate speech, and strengthening the criminal justice system. Its formulation and implementation under PML-N leadership marked a shift toward a comprehensive, state-led counterterrorism approach.

PML-N also worked to enhance the role of civilian institutions in counterterrorism governance. The strengthening of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and coordination with provincial law enforcement agencies reflected an intent to civilianize security mechanisms. These steps were essential for long-term, institutional responses to extremism rather than relying solely on military operations. Moreover, PML-N supported civilian oversight of security-related legislation, including the passage of laws such as the Protection of Pakistan Act and military courts' constitutional sanctioning through the 21st Amendment. While these were extraordinary measures, the party emphasized the importance of legal oversight, time limitations, and eventual transition back to regular judicial processes. PML-N's counterterrorism policy was grounded in strengthening state capacity while attempting to preserve democratic norms and civilian supremacy (Gohar et al., 2022).

Engagement with International Democratic Norms

The PML-N has consistently sought to align Pakistan with international democratic norms and practices, particularly during its time in government. It actively engaged with global democratic forums such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, promoting parliamentary diplomacy and showcasing Pakistan's democratic progress on international platforms. These engagements allowed Pakistan to present itself as a functioning democracy committed to civilian governance and political inclusivity. Under PML-N leadership, Pakistan also pursued trade and diplomatic relations with democratic countries, with a key achievement being compliance with the EU's GSP+ requirements, which are linked to human rights, labor laws, and democratic governance. This status not only boosted Pakistan's exports but also encouraged domestic reforms aligned with global democratic standards (Dastagir, 2018).

Moreover, the PML-N emphasized projecting a democratic image of Pakistan globally, engaging with foreign media, think tanks, and international civil society. It invited international election observers during general elections, particularly in 2013, demonstrating openness to external scrutiny and a commitment to transparent electoral processes. Overall, PML-N's international

engagement reflected its understanding that Pakistan's democratic development is interconnected with global perceptions, norms, and alliances rooted in democratic values.

Challenges and Criticisms

While the PML-N has played a significant role in strengthening democratic institutions and processes, its democratic credentials have not gone unchallenged. Critics and political opponents have raised several concerns about the party's internal structures, governance style, and handling of key national issues. These criticisms point to limitations and contradictions within the party's broader democratic narrative.

One of the most persistent criticisms directed at the PML-N is its alleged authoritarian tendencies and dynastic political culture. The party has often been accused of centralizing power within the Sharif family, with key leadership roles circulating among close relatives of Nawaz Sharif. This has raised concerns about intra-party democracy and merit-based leadership development. Critics argue that such concentration of authority undermines the democratic process within the party and limits opportunities for grassroots political participation. Decisions are often perceived to be top-down, reducing the autonomy of party members (Sheikh, 2009).

Another major area of criticism involves allegations of electoral manipulation and corruption. The PML-N has repeatedly been accused by rival parties of benefiting from backroom political arrangements and influencing electoral outcomes, particularly in the 2024. While independent observers acknowledged improvements in the 2013 elections, opposition parties such as PTI alleged large-scale rigging, leading to prolonged political instability and protests. Furthermore, high-profile corruption cases such as the Panama Papers revelations that led to Nawaz Sharif's disqualification by the Supreme Court in 2017, have severely damaged the party's image. These scandals fueled narratives that PML-N used state power for personal and financial gain, thus weakening democratic legitimacy.

The civil-military relationship has also remained a point of tension throughout PML-N's political journey. While the party has publicly advocated for civilian supremacy, its confrontational approach with the military establishment has often led to political crises rather than institutional balance. The 1999 coup that ousted Nawaz Sharif and the repeated breakdowns in civil-military relations during the 2013-2018 tenure highlight the challenges of navigating this delicate dynamic. Some observers argue that PML-N's occasional hardline stance provoked unnecessary conflict, while others believe the party compromised too quickly under pressure, failing to assert genuine democratic authority. Either way, these recurring confrontations have undermined democratic stability and governance continuity (Zahid et al., 2023).

In addition, PML-N has faced criticism for its governance style, which sometimes prioritized development over democratic inclusion. For example, the "Punjab Model" under Shahbaz Sharif, while praised for efficiency and infrastructure progress, was also critiqued for centralized decision-making and neglect of participatory governance. Civil society actors have pointed out instances where dissenting voices, independent media, and political opponents were sidelined or discouraged, raising concerns about the party's commitment to pluralism and democratic discourse. While the PML-N has undeniably contributed to democratic consolidation in Pakistan, it has also been constrained by internal contradictions, accusations of authoritarianism, and unresolved tensions with key state institutions. A comprehensive assessment of its role in Pakistan's democratic evolution must take into account both its achievements and its shortcomings, as these dual realities shape the broader journey of democratic politics in the country (Khan, 2022).

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the role of the PML-N in the strengthening of democracy in Pakistan, exploring its contributions across electoral politics, institutional reforms, legislative performance, governance, and national security. The PML-N's role in bolstering democratic practices has been marked by its efforts to improve electoral processes, uphold the public mandate, and engage in parliamentary law-making. Through key constitutional amendments and legislative initiatives, the party has demonstrated a consistent, albeit sometimes contested, commitment to democratic norms and civilian supremacy, especially in civil-military relations and judicial-executive dynamics.

Despite significant achievements, including attempts at institutional reform, promoting federal-provincial harmony, and pursuing economic policies with a public welfare orientation, the PML-N has faced criticism for its shortcomings in media freedom, internal accountability, and inconsistent support for civil society engagement. However, the party's engagement with democratic transitions, counterterrorism policy, and alignment with international democratic standards highlights its complex but consequential role in Pakistan's democratic evolution. While challenges persist, the PML-N's multifaceted contributions underscore its significance as a key actor in Pakistan's democratic consolidation.

Recommendations

1. *Institutionalize Intra-Party Democracy:* The PML-N should prioritize internal democratic reforms by ensuring transparent leadership elections, inclusive decision-making, and merit-based political advancement. Strengthening intra-party democracy will enhance the party's credibility, foster political pluralism, and reduce the concentration of power in dynastic structures.
2. *Strengthen Civil-Military Relations through Legislative Oversight:* To consolidate civilian supremacy, the PML-N must actively support and institutionalize parliamentary oversight of security and defense institutions. Establishing effective mechanisms for accountability and civilian input in national security policymaking is essential for a balanced and democratic civil-military relationship.
3. *Enhance Parliamentary Performance and Legislative Engagement:* The party should increase its focus on meaningful legislative activity by initiating public-interest bills, attending parliamentary sessions regularly, and engaging constructively in debates. Improved parliamentary performance will not only reflect democratic commitment but also build public trust in representative institutions.
4. *Promote Media Freedom and Civil Society Participation:* The PML-N must adopt a more consistent and principled stance on media independence and civil society engagement. Ensuring legal protections for journalists, refraining from coercive tactics, and fostering collaboration with civic actors are vital for a vibrant democratic culture.
5. *Pursue Equitable Governance and Socioeconomic Reforms:* Democratic legitimacy can be deepened by aligning governance with public welfare priorities. The PML-N should implement inclusive economic policies, strengthen social safety nets, and address regional disparities to ensure that democratic dividends reach all segments of society, particularly marginalized communities.

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