

Received: 5 January 2024, Accepted: 10 February 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33282/rr.vx9il.85>

Pakistani State Power Structure: Old and New Faces

Karam Elahi¹, Tariq Ullah², Usman Khan³, Sarfaraz Khan⁴, M. Tariq Khan⁵

Abstract:

The hitherto Pakistani state power structure has been dominated by the landed elite, indigenous and metropolitan bourgeois, civil and military oligarchy. Nevertheless, some new power contenders have been successful in finding space, amidst the presence of old one, in the state power structure. This research article answers the question: what individuals or groups have made entry into the Pakistani state power structure in the last couple of years? Secondary as well as primary data through interviews have been consulted, collected and interpreted through content analysis. In addition to the landed elite, indigenous and metropolitan bourgeois, civil and military oligarchy, we found that section of judges of the superior courts, electable (s) and new religious right, i.e. TLP, have entered into the Pakistani state power structure.

Keywords: power, elite, state structure, civil-military oligarchy, metropolitan bourgeois, electable (s)

Introduction:

American theorist, C. Wright Mill introduced the concept of power elite for the first time in his book ‘*The Power Elite*’ in 1956. He captivated readers with his penetrating analysis and fiery critique of the organization of power in the United States. Mills called attention to three firmly interlocked prongs of power: the military, the big corporations and the influential political families. This led to numerous scholarly debates over such questions as whether corporations dominate government or government retained some autonomy from these corporations, whether it was possible for government to pass laws that run counter to the interests of business community, and whether the military or the elected government dominate the making of foreign policy (Mills & Wolfe, 2000).

In the context of Pakistan, this manuscript understands power elites as those individuals or groups of individuals who occupy and find strategic positions in the state power structure where they can influence decisions of the elected governments directly as well as indirectly. Hamza Alavi, a political sociologist, opined that Pakistani state power structure has been

¹ Collector of Customs, holds a Ph. D in Political Science, Visiting Faculty (Governance & Public Policy), at IMSciences Peshawar, Pakistan (email: karamepahidc@yahoo.com)

² Deputy Commissioner Swabi, KP, and holds a doctorate degree in Political Science (tariqullah86@gmail.com)

³ Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Malakand, KP, Pakistan, Email: Usman.khan.uom@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

⁴ Assistant Professor of Pakistan Studies, Center for Caucasian, Asian, Chinese, and Pakistan Studies, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan (email: sarafarazkhan@uswat.edu.pk)

⁵ Visiting lecturer in Pakistan Studies, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan

dominated by the landed elite, indigenous and metropolitan⁶ bourgeoisies and civil-military oligarchy. The author termed Pakistan as ‘over-developed’ where the un-elected apparatuses such as civil bureaucracy and military bureaucracy are more powerful than the elected representative bodies (Alavi, 1972). However, some new forces like judiciary, urban middle-class, and media have also managed space in the state power structure (Akhtar, 2018; Javid, 2012; McCartney & Zaidi, 2019; Mohmand, 2019).

Pakistani State Power Structure: Is it Grown?

In a response to one of my interview questions, most of the respondents commented that military, civil servants, judges, and religious clerics are the individuals and groups who dominate state power structure of Pakistan. Further, the respondent added that these individuals and groups regularly and substantially influence formulation and execution of decisions of the elected governments in Pakistan (Hussain, 2020; Yousaf, 2020; Marjan, 2020; Samad, 2020).

Moreover, one of the respondents⁷ informed us through a telephonic interview that along with old power contenders, new individuals and groups such as judges, Islamists, some of the politicians who frequently change party loyalties, and merchants, traders and transporters have also been successful in occupying strategic positions in the Pakistani state power structure (Babar, 2020). Hence, top brass of the army, bureaucrats, religious right, judges, propertied class and a segment of politicians, known as electable(s) are the elites who dominate state power structure of Pakistan. Now, it is pertinent to highlight each power elite, to set a background to the discussion and to somehow extend the list of power elite documented in most of the traditional literature.

Military Elite

The political history of Pakistan informs us that since **1950s or 1960s** military dominates state politics. In response to one of my interview questions, the respondents demonstrated that military in Pakistan has a greater share in the state power structure where they have dominated domestic as well as external politics. They were of the views that military find portfolios even in elected regimes (Rehman, 2020; Marjan, 2020; Ahamd, 2020). According to Tahir Samad⁸, the army especially its top brass and the army as an institutional whole predominantly occupies strategic position in the power structure regularly and substantially influencing domestic as well as external policies of the elected governments of Pakistan

⁶ By metropolitan bourgeois, Alavi means colonialist. In the post-independence Pakistan, this term implies old and new colonialists, i.e. the British as well as Americans who have direct connections with Pakistani state civil-military bureaucracy.

⁷ Said Babar is a professor in Public Sector University and a renowned researcher and political activist. He has thoroughly written on the political economy, state theories, society and culture of Pakistan. He is the author of several books and research articles on the power structure of Pakistan.

⁸ Tahir Samad is the dean faculty of social sciences in a Public Sector University at Sindh. The academic has an extensive research on civil-military relations in Pakistan. He has also written articles on indigenous movements especially left politics in Pakistan.

(Samad, 2020). In this context, history of Pakistan unveils that it has witnessed four direct military coups, 1958, 1969, 1977, and 1999 and even during elected regimes the army has indirectly influenced state politics. For instance, post-Zia (1988-1999) and post-Musharraf's period are witnessed to the military indirect interferences in the state affairs (Siddiqa, 2019).

Bilal Ahmad⁹, a political analyst was of the view that politics of 1990s was characterised by 'troika' where the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), the President and the Prime Minister were involved in a 'tug of war'. He added that there was a consistent struggle for power between these three offices. Similarly, the respondent remarked that military role could be seen in the general elections of 2013 and 2018 respectively and its persistence support to the army chief's extension in the recent past (Ahmad, 2020). Moreover, the military showed serious concern over the decision of the superior court when it declared former COAS and president, Pervaiz Musharraf, as traitor under article 6 of the constitution (1973) and awarded him death sentence. Likewise, there are multiple instances like Abbotabad incident, Memogate Scandal, Umar Asghar Khan case where the military has strongly resisted the superior court decisions (Zaidi, 2014).

Hence, the discussion informs us that top brass of the army and army as an institutional whole is one of the power elites who take great share in the power equation regularly and substantially influencing political decisions of the elected governments in Pakistan. Along with the military, civil servants also dominate state power structure of Pakistan.

Bureaucratic Elite

Like military, the civil servants or bureaucrats also find positions in the state power structure of Pakistan. The political history of Pakistan tells that civil bureaucracy had a predominant position in the state affairs especially from 1951 till 1958. This period is best described as the era of civil-military oligarchy where civil servants and military dominated state politics (Chowdhury, 1988). However, according to Sareer Wali,¹⁰ strength of the civil bureaucracy had got reduced with the arrival of military in 1958. Ayub Khan, the then Commander in Chief, had appointed several military personnel on civilian posts that weakened the hitherto dominance of civil servants of Pakistan (Wali, 2020).

Nevertheless, pay and pension commission of Pakistan sent servants to world high ranked universities and on their return, they worked well for the Basic Democracy (BD) and Rural Development Programme (RDP) under Ayub Khan. Once again, the respondent expressed his views that civil servants were alienated by ZA Bhutto's reforms in 1973 especially by the

⁹Bilal Ahmad is a political analyst based in Karachi. His research focuses on state theories, regime transformation and transition in Pakistan.

¹⁰ Sareer Wali is a professor in Public Sector University in Islamabad. His research mainly focuses on power and issues of governance in Pakistan.

lateral entry¹¹ to the colonial steel frame of the state, i.e. bureaucracy. Musharaf devolution of power plan further reduced the influence of the civilian bureaucracy in Pakistan (Wali, 2020).

According to Muhammad Alam¹²the reforms under Devolution Plan (2002) has bifurcated powers between elected mayor (Nazim) and Deputy Commissioner at the district level. He stated that the Devolution Plan(2002) has also weakened district level bureaucracy by bringing local elected councillors and mayors into local administration (Alam, 2020). However, despite these reforms the civil servants and bureaucrats have obstructed various reforms packages in the last three decades which shows that they still influence decisions of the elected government of Pakistan by various ways like their strict adherence to the colonial legacy.

Bureaucracy in Pakistan is characterised by centralisation, hierarchy and strict colonial rules and regulations. This colonial structure provides authority, power and prestige to the civil servants of Pakistan (Shafqat, 1999). Ayesha Jalal¹³ views civil servants or bureaucrats in Pakistan as the untouchable. She nicknamed them as the “Civil Sultans (emperors) of Pakistan”. She suggested that for effective democratization, the civil servants need to be servants rather than Master or Sultan of the state (Jalal, 2020).

Thus, the bureaucratic elite or civil servants are powerful enough to challenge elected governments in Pakistan in their legislation and its execution. The preceding discussion explains that along with the military and bureaucratic elites, judges are newly emerged power elite in Pakistan.

The Judges

A section of judges is newly emerged power elite in Pakistan who are capable to question the elected parliament, executive and even military. The constitutional history of Pakistan reveals that from 1954 till 2005, the superior judiciary has remained subservient to the military and executive. The judiciary has to validate extra-constitutional steps of Ayub Khan, Zia and Pervaiz Musharraf in 1958, 1977 and 1999 respectively under the doctrine of state of necessity (Zaidi, 2014). However, during Musharraf’s regime differences between military and judges occurred that led to emergence of the superior judiciary as power elite getting share in the state power structure and influencing decisions of the elected governments. Scholar argues that judiciary in Pakistan since 2007 get equal share in the equation of state powers. Some scholars even assert that judiciary is the rival of the military in terms of powers struggle (Javed, 2018; Kalhan, 2013; Waseem, 2012).

¹¹The entry of professionals into civil bureaucracy is termed as lateral entry.

¹² Muhammad Alam is a senior bureaucrat and a Ph. D degree holder based in Peshawar, KP.

¹³ Ayesha Jalal was invited the National Institute of Management Quetta. She talked to civil servants on ‘Rethinking the role of bureaucracy in Pakistan’ on Zoom on 30-06-2020.

Several developments have taken place that has added to the strength of judiciary as newly emerged power elite in Pakistan. In this context, Siraj Ahmad a lawyer¹⁴ by profession told us in telephonic conversation that *suo-motu* actions against privatization of Pakistan Steel Mill (2007), construction of a park on a roadside in Karachi, and disqualification of Pervaiz Musharraf for second term president-ship and then president Musharraf's pre-emptive strike against the Chief Justice of Pakistan had sparked a movement, known as "Lawyer Movement" which proved a catalyst for the restoration of judges as well as for the judiciary as a new power contender in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2020).

The lawyer movement in 2007 has strengthened judiciary in Pakistan and its influence and strength can best be understood from various decisions in the last decade. Sareer Wali expressed his opinion about the lawyer movement by commenting that the movement became nation-wide when large number of masses provided support which finally caused Pervaiz Musharraf's withdrawal in 2007. Afterward, judiciary became powerful enough to remove elected prime ministers as well. Further, it also questioned extension of the army chief in 2019. Again, the superior judiciary has convicted Pervaiz Musharraf as traitor under article 6 of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 (Wali, 2020).

The passage reveals that the judiciary since 2007 has emerged a new power player in Pakistan that has somehow challenged the hitherto dominance of military. In addition, it has challenged several decisions of the elected governments also. Along with the judiciary, there is a segment of politicians who are also connected with the state power structure and has influenced elected government and its autonomy in Pakistan.

Electable (s)

Some politicians always try to remain connected to the power structure of Pakistan. Professor Ahmad Yousaf told us in telephonic conversation that there are politicians who always remain connected to the establishment in order to pursue their political and economic interests (Yousaf, 2020). Such politicians generally move from party to party based on every election cycle. One of the respondents, Saeed Malik hailing from a political family, commented,

Politics of last three decades best depicts politicians who frequently changed their party loyalties. The respondent added, 'our elders have also changed nearly four political parties in short span of 20 years'. He stated that electable(s) are coupled together to complete the required majority of the government" (Malik, 2020).

"Politics of last three decades best depicts politicians who frequently changed their party loyalties. The respondent added, 'our elders have also changed nearly four political parties in short span of 20 years'. He stated that electable(s) are coupled together to complete the required majority of the government" (Malik, 2020).

¹⁴ Siraj Ahmad is a senior lawyer at Peshawar High Court. Ahmad has actively participated in the lawyer movement of 2007 for the restoration of Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chowdhury.

The respondent shared a list of politicians who remained ministers under the military as well as democratic regimes especially in the last three decades. Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Pervaiz Khattak, Khusro Bakhtiar, Umar Ayub, Zubaida Jalal, Fahmida Mirza, Sheikh Rasheed Ahamd, Shafqat Mehmood, and Fakhr Imam are ministers in the current PTI cabinet who have also been the ministers in previous regimes of PPP, PMLN and PLMQ (Malik, 2020).

Power hungry politicians and their connections with the establishment influence and weaken parliamentary democracy in many ways. Akhtar demonstrates that there are even some ethno-nationalist politicians as well who seek power and therefore have pro-establishment leanings. The author argues that veteran nationalist politicians use nationalist rhetoric during the election campaign in order to get elected and when they reach corridor of powers, they shun their rhetoric and join establishment (Akhtar, 2018).

The political history of Pakistan is full of record of politicians who have changed party loyalties. According to Sayyed Sami Ullah Jan, some of the political parties strike compromises with the establishment in order to gain political power. The political parties lack discipline and some of them do not have ideological bases or ideological programmes that could keep members intact. Therefore, people easily leave and join parties depending on every election cycle (Jan, 2020).

Thus, a segment of politicians always tries to keep in touch with power structure dominated by the powerful actors, military and civil bureaucracy, to pursue its political and economic gains. This also led to frequent changes from one party to another that weaken party system in Pakistan which in turn affect growth of democratic culture in Pakistan. Besides, military, bureaucracy, judiciary and electable (s), there is a section of economic elite who join the bandwagon of power elites in Pakistan.

The Urban Elite

There are financiers, contractors, transporters, traders who are not formally involved in the power equation or formally represented in the power structure but they have significant links with establishment in Pakistan. Babar in this connection commented that their connections with establishment turn them powerful enough to influence elected regimes in Pakistan (Babar, 2020). A researcher and an activist, Naveed Omar based in Karachi, was of the view that urban economic elite have emerged due to migration to Gulf countries such Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The remittances from Gulf have been invested in Pakistani cities. The respondent added that aspirations of the urban economic elite to become wealthier and join elite or bourgeoisie class strengthen authoritarianism at the cost of democracy in Pakistan (Omar, 2020).

Further, the urban elite in Pakistan rose to prominence with the progressive mechanization of agriculture and development of agro-processing industries in the urbanizing areas around the agricultural plains in the northern and central regions of the Punjab, and to a lesser extent in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The rural-urban migrations that were coeval

with the Green Revolution in the 1960s, as well as migrations to the Gulf and other parts of the world from the early 1970s, reinforced emergent trends. These developments have considerable multiplier effects that have further fuelled expansion of small and medium enterprises in towns and cities (Zaidi, 2005).

Tahir Samad, a professor based in Karachi, commented on a telephonic interview that urban elite has reduced the significance of landed class in the power structure. He commented that the urban elite occupy 25% positions in government sectors. Further, the respondent contextualised significance of urban elite and stated that this class has drastically reduced the pre-eminence of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Sindh and Punjab respectively (Samad, 2020). Moreover, urban elite is mostly attached to the establishment dominated by the military. For instance, Bazar traders and merchants were active in Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) which was formed against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto during 1977 in response to election rigging that was joined by the urban elite due to Bhutto nationalisation policy (Javed, 2017).

The urban elite are powerful enough to put pressure on elected government in Pakistan. Further, their aspirations of upward mobility convince them to develop connection with the establishment. They support any system whether democratic or no-democratic at the behest of satisfying their economic aspirations. Additionally, as evident from PNA against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto during 1970s, the religious elite also play a role in influencing decisions of the elected government in Pakistan.

The Religious Right

The religious right, having mass support and street power, is more powerful in an ideological state like Pakistan. According to Professor Gul Marjan¹⁵, religious establishment has ideological and cultural powers that have a huge network of religious institutions like Madaris (religious seminaries) which they use to mobilize the masses against government if it takes a decision that touches their religious sentiments. Moreover, the respondent added that the religious establishment have the ability to build pressure on elected government through agitations as has been the case in Pakistan during 1970s, 2013 and 2017 (Marjan, 2020).

The practice of sit-ins in the metropolitan city of Pakistan, Islamabad, is witnessed to the fact when religious clerics like Tahir ul Qadri and Khadim Hussain Rizvi, a religious right, of Tehreek e Labbaik of Pakistan (TLP) mobilized huge number of religious cohorts against some of the decisions of the elected government of Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari. Professor Bilal Ahmad told us in personal communication that the government of PTI has to remove a financial advisor, Atif Mian, due to his Ahmadi community connection. The religious establishment especially Khadim Hussain Rizvi built public pressure that finally led to removal of the advisor (Ahmad, 2020).

¹⁵ Gul Marjan is a Professor and Journalist based in Karachi who extensively writes on governance issues in Pakistan.

Furthermore, in the very recent past government of PTI has issued fund for the construction of a Hindu temple at Islamabad but due to the public outrage motivated and mobilised by religious establishment, the government could not carry out its construction. The interviewee added that the religious parties contain electable(s) having connection with the powerful military who use it for their strategic interests (Ahmad, 2020).

The religious political parties and their politics strengthen authoritarianism as they remain connected with military establishment. Haaqani observed garrison-mosque alliance in Pakistan which is a natural alliance due to the state ideology. This alliance can be observed from the Cold War politics where Jamat e IslamiJ (JI) supported Gen. Zia against communist revolution in Afghanistan. Similarly, Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) or Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA) during 1990s was orchestrated by the military to defeat Benazir Bhutto. Likewise, Muttihida Majlis e Aml (MMA) provided support to Musharraf's regime during 2002-2007 (Haqqani, 2010).

Conclusion

The above discussion informs us that there are multiple powerful individuals and groups who dominate Pakistani state power structure. This is non-denying the fact that at the face of such elites, representative institutions and political leaders are weak to assert within the political system. Moreover, the discussion also unearths that Alavi's 'overdeveloped state structure' characterised by the land-owning class, indigenous bourgeois, metropolitan bourgeois, and civil-military oligarchy has undergone a change. Direct influence of the military in the politics has reduced due to the emergence of judiciary and civil societies, education and new media especially social media. However, we assert that military has been seen more assertive where of course direct coup has not taken place, but its indirect role has enhanced. Further, influence of the landed class has reduced due to the emergence of urban economic elite. Likewise, role of bureaucrats or civil servants has reduced due to the reforms introduced by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Pervaiz Musharraf. Nevertheless, bureaucratic elites still have a firm grip over policy and decision-making and have the capacity to challenge legislation and execution of the elected governments in Pakistan. Further, judges have emerged a new power contender. In addition, a new phenomenon known as electability has been observed in Pakistani politics. Further, new alliance between military and mosque, i.e. Tehreek e Labaik Pakistan of Khadim Hussain Rizvi, a religious right belonging to Brelvi group, has emerged.

References

- Akhtar, A. S. (2018). *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan*: Cambridge University Press.
- Alavi, H. (1972). The state in post-colonial societies Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review*(74), 59.
- Chowdhury, M. (1988). *Pakistan: Its Politics and Bureaucracy*. New Delhi: Associated Publishing House.
- Haqqani, H. (2010). *Pakistan: Between mosque and military*: Carnegie Endowment.
- Jalal, A. (2020). In NIMS (Ed.), *Zoom*.
- Javed, U. (2017). Profit, protest and power: Bazaar politics in urban Pakistan. *Routledge handbook of contemporary Pakistan*, 148-159.
- Javed, U. (2018). The Struggle for Control of Pakistan's Fragile Democracy. *Current History*, 117(798), 123-128.
- Javid, H. (2012). *Class, power, and patronage: the landed elite and politics in Pakistani Punjab*. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
- Kalhan, A. (2013). Gray Zone Constitutionalism and the Dilemma of Judicial Independence in Pakistan. *Vand. J. Transnat'l L.*, 46, 1.
- McCartney, M., & Zaidi, S. A. (2019). *New Perspectives on Pakistan's Political Economy: State, Class and Social Change* (Vol. 9): Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, C. W., & Wolfe, A. (2000). *The power elite* (Vol. 20): Oxford University Press.
- Mohmand, S. K. (2019). *Crafty Oligarchs, Savvy Voters: Democracy Under Inequality in Rural Pakistan* (Vol. 8): Cambridge University Press.
- Shafqat, S. (1999). Pakistani bureaucracy: Crisis of governance and prospects of reform. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 38(4), 995-1017.
- Siddiq, A. (2019). Pakistan—From Hybrid-Democracy to Hybrid-Martial Law. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(2), 52-72.
- Waseem, M. (2012). Judging democracy in Pakistan: Conflict between the executive and judiciary. *Contemporary South Asia*, 20(1), 19-31.
- Zaidi, S. A. (2005). State, military and social transition: Improbable future of democracy in Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5173-5181.
- Zaidi, S. A. (2014). Rethinking Pakistan's political economy: class, state, power, and transition. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47-54.