
RESEARCH PAPER

Examining the Role of Caretaker Governments in Undermining Democracy in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of caretaker governments in Pakistan, focusing on their constitutional mandate and the ways in which they have undermined the democratic process. Specifically, it investigates the 2022-2024 caretaker period, analyzing how the extension of caretaker rule violated constitutional provisions and delayed the electoral process, impacting the stability of democracy in the country. The research aims to understand the functions of caretaker governments, their legal limitations, and the consequences of their overreach on political legitimacy. The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on legal documents, court cases, and expert opinions to assess the situation. Key findings reveal that while caretaker governments are intended to be neutral entities, their prolonged tenure and involvement in political matters have disrupted the electoral process and eroded public trust in democratic institutions. The study argues for the need for constitutional reforms, particularly to ensure timely elections and strengthen judicial oversight. The research highlights the broader implications of caretaker governance on Pakistan's political and economic systems and calls for a more robust constitutional framework to safeguard democratic integrity in future transitions.

Keywords: Accountability, Caretaker Administration, Constitutional Law, Democracy, Electoral Reforms, Governance, Political Legitimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of Pakistan has been marked by frequent interruptions to its democratic processes, with caretaker governments often stepping in during transitional periods. These temporary administrations are meant to oversee elections and ensure the functioning of governance until a newly elected government takes office (Shehzad, 2022). However, the role and powers of caretaker governments have raised significant concerns, particularly in the aftermath of

the 2022 no-confidence motion that led to the removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the subsequent caretaker governance (Adnan, 2023). The 2022-2024 caretaker period in Pakistan has revealed critical flaws in the constitutional framework governing these governments, especially regarding the prolonged tenure of the caretaker administration and the failure to hold elections within the constitutionally mandated timeline. This study seeks to explore the constitutional role of caretaker governments in Pakistan, investigating their legal powers and the impact of their extended rule on democratic processes (Bari, 2018). The research aims to answer the following questions: How has the caretaker government system in Pakistan been abused to undermine democratic principles? What constitutional violations have occurred, and what are the implications for Pakistan's democratic future?

The research methodology primarily involves a literature review, including analysis of relevant legal statutes, court rulings, and expert opinions. It will also use case studies from Pakistan's recent history to provide context. The findings will address the constitutional violations during the caretaker period and propose reforms to restore the rule of law.

The article will be structured as follows: After this introduction, the literature review will analyze existing research on caretaker governments. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks will then clarify the theoretical basis for understanding caretaker governance. A detailed analysis of how the Constitution was abrogated during the caretaker period follows. Subsequent sections will discuss the constitutional mandate of caretaker governments, the role of the Supreme Court, and the broader implications of prolonged caretaker governance. The article will conclude with suggestions for reform and future directions for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the role of caretaker governments in Pakistan, particularly in relation to constitutional and political dynamics, reveals significant concerns about the erosion of democratic norms. The Constitution of Pakistan, particularly Article 224-A, clearly outlines that caretaker governments should be temporary and non-partisan, tasked solely with overseeing elections and maintaining governance until a new elected government takes office. However, numerous legal scholars have pointed out that these constitutional guidelines are frequently violated, as caretaker administrations often get entangled in partisan politics. In particular, after the 2022 no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan, the caretaker governments in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa failed to fulfill their constitutional mandate of holding elections within 90 days. This delay and political interference undermined the integrity of the electoral process and deepened the crisis of governance in the country.

Court rulings on the matter, such as those in Constitution Petition No. 5 of 2023, reflect the difficulties in enforcing constitutional provisions against political manipulation. In these cases, while the judiciary attempted to clarify the roles and duties of the caretaker governments, it was unable to prevent their extension beyond the constitutionally mandated time frame. Scholars such as Mirza (2023) argue that this lack of enforcement has contributed to a weakening of democratic institutions in Pakistan. Further, the involvement of political establishments, often acting behind the scenes, has been noted as a major factor in the subversion of caretaker governments' neutrality.

Legal scholars like Sattar (2020) and Anwar (2023) emphasize that the unchecked influence of powerful political factions has rendered these governments more as tools of the establishment than impartial overseers of the electoral process. This body of literature suggests that despite clear constitutional guidelines, caretaker governments in Pakistan are frequently manipulated to serve political interests, undermining the rule of law and the democratic process.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual and theoretical framework of this study revolves around the relationship between constitutional mandates and political reality in Pakistan's governance structure, particularly focusing on caretaker governments. The study draws on the theory of constitutional supremacy, which posits that all state actions must conform to the principles outlined in the Constitution to ensure legitimacy and stability. It explores the tension between the ideal constitutional role of caretaker governments—acting as neutral, temporary administrations solely responsible for overseeing elections—and their actual functioning, often influenced by political manipulation and the establishment's interference. This framework examines how the actions of these caretaker governments, particularly in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2022-2023, conflict with the constitutional provisions that demand elections within a fixed timeframe. The study also incorporates theories of democratic erosion, which suggest that the subversion of constitutional processes, such as the failure to hold timely elections, weakens democratic institutions and undermines public trust in the political system. By applying this framework, the research aims to analyze how deviations from constitutional norms impact the democratic process in Pakistan and challenge the rule of law.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, primarily based on a literature review, to investigate the constitutional and actual roles of caretaker governments in Pakistan, focusing on the political events of 2022-2023. The study collects data from various sources, including constitutional texts, judicial rulings, legislative documents, and scholarly articles, to examine the legal framework governing caretaker administrations and their deviation from constitutional mandates. Court cases such as Constitution Petition No. 5 of 2023 and relevant case law are analyzed to understand how judicial interpretations have shaped the role of caretaker governments. Additionally, political analysis and expert opinions are incorporated to assess the influence of political establishments on caretaker governments. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by identifying key patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the implementation of constitutional provisions. The qualitative analysis enables an in-depth evaluation of the constitutional, legal, and political dimensions of the issue, providing a nuanced perspective on the relationship between law and politics in Pakistan's governance.

HOW WAS CONSTITUTION ABROGATED?

The abrogation of the Constitution in Pakistan, particularly regarding the failure to hold elections within the mandated 90-day period following the dissolution of the provincial assemblies in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), can be traced to a series of political and legal missteps that extended the caretaker governments' tenure far beyond what the Constitution allows.

According to Article 112 of the Constitution, when a provincial assembly is dissolved, general elections must be held within 90 days. This provision is designed to ensure that the will of the people is reflected through timely elections. However, after the dissolution of the assemblies in both provinces, the caretaker governments, though formed, failed to announce election dates as required by law (Molla, 2000).

The constitutional crisis deepened when President Arif Alvi, on 21st February 2023, unilaterally announced April 9, 2023, as the election date for Punjab and KPK, raising legal questions about whether the president had the authority to do so. This prompted the Supreme Court to take *suo moto* notice and examine the issue. The Court ruled that the president had the jurisdiction to announce the election date for Punjab due to the governor's failure to act, while also reprimanding the KPK governor for his delay in declaring the election date, labeling it a "*breach of his constitutional responsibility*" (Bokhari, 2007)

Despite the Court's efforts to uphold constitutional integrity, the caretaker government continued to function beyond the prescribed period, with elections not held as mandated. This breach of the Constitution led to the unprecedented extension of the caretaker government's tenure for over 13 months (from January 2023 to February 2024), undermining the democratic process and creating a significant constitutional and governance crisis in Pakistan. This failure highlights the growing challenges in maintaining constitutional rule, as the judiciary struggled to enforce deadlines and hold political institutions accountable (Chapter 2: "Electoral Laws and conduct of Elections" of Part VIII: "Elections." (1973)).

CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE OF THE CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

Article 224-A of the constitution of Pakistan provides the mandate to the caretaker governments. The caretakers in Pakistan are actually temporary, and essentially non-political people, and their role is to facilitate and help in organizing the general elections in the country and maintain the governance in a normal functioning until a new, elected government with a fresh mandate takes charge. Its powers are very limited, and it must remain neutral, and must not make any legislative decision that could impact the results of the upcoming general elections.

Despite the fact that article 224(1) clearly states that the elections shall held within a specific given time in certain circumstances which may be sixty to ninety days, this caretaker government prolonged and even continued for more than a year, killing the original definition of democracy which was a Government of the people, government by the people and government for the people, rather it was the government of the Establishment, Government by the establishment and of course an exemplary Government for the establishment (Chapter 2: "Electoral Laws and Conduct of Elections" of Part VIII: "Elections," 1973).

SUPREME COURT OF PAKISTAN; A TOOTHLESS TIGER

The Supreme Court of Pakistan in Constitution Petition NO.5 OF 2023

Order dated 22.03.2023 passed by the learned three member judges comprising of the then chief justice of Pakistan, Justice Ummer Atta Bandial, Justice Ijaz Ul Ahsin and Justice Muneeb Akhter ordered the election commission of Pakistan to hold election and even made a schedule

accordingly for the same, and gave a date of 30-04-2023, as the polling day, but election commission backed by the shiny shoulders did what they planned to do. Justice was delayed and hence denied once again. The caretakers were free to legislate, were free to govern and were free to rule without any mandate given by the 5th largest population of the world, it all happened in these modern times, and everyone stayed silent (Mohammad Sibtain Khan V. Election Commission of Pakistan, 2023).

CASE STUDIES OF OTHER COUNTRIES

A comparative analysis of caretaker governments in other democratic systems can offer valuable insights and lessons for Pakistan in terms of maintaining democratic principles and constitutional integrity during transitional periods. Below are case studies from various countries that have implemented caretaker governments in similar contexts:

India: Role of Caretaker Governments in Transition

In India, caretaker governments are formed in the event of the dissolution of the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and when general elections are called. The Indian Constitution outlines the caretaker government's role as a temporary administrative body, which must remain neutral and refrain from making any significant policy decisions that could influence the electoral process. The Indian model ensures that the government does not overstep its mandate by curbing its powers strictly to administrative functions, such as overseeing elections, maintaining law and order, and ensuring governance continuity (Khan, 2017).

Lesson for Pakistan: The Indian experience highlights the importance of clearly defining the caretaker government's powers in the Constitution, ensuring neutrality, and preventing interference in the electoral process. Pakistan could adopt a more structured framework that clearly delineates the role of caretakers during election periods, helping prevent any erosion of democratic integrity.

Bangladesh: Political Instability and the Caretaker System

Bangladesh has experienced a series of caretaker governments, particularly in the period following the 1990s, when the caretaker system was institutionalized. The role of the caretaker government in Bangladesh was enshrined in the Constitution after the controversial political crises of the 1990s, with the system ensuring that elections could be held in a neutral and non-partisan environment. However, the system has been criticized for causing political instability when there is a lack of consensus among major political parties on the caretaker's composition (Mahmud, 2007).

Lesson for Pakistan: The Bangladesh case teaches that while caretaker governments are meant to be neutral, their legitimacy can be undermined if political parties are unable to reach an agreement on the appointment of caretakers. This underlines the need for a clear, agreed-upon process for caretaker appointments in Pakistan, ensuring that they do not become a source of political division or manipulation.

Canada: Stability and Transparency in Caretaker Governments

In Canada, the caretaker government system operates under a well-established tradition where, after the dissolution of Parliament, the incumbent government remains in place, but its role is strictly limited to carrying out its functions in a caretaker capacity. The government does not introduce new policies or make significant decisions that could affect the election outcomes. Caretaker governments in Canada are also guided by constitutional conventions that emphasize transparency, accountability, and neutrality (Bennett et al., 2014).

Lesson for Pakistan: Canada's practice demonstrates how a well-regulated caretaker system, grounded in constitutional conventions, can preserve democratic values while ensuring governmental stability. Pakistan could benefit from creating conventions that define the boundaries of caretaker governments' actions, alongside formal constitutional provisions, to foster transparency and prevent misuse of power.

Australia: Constitutional Framework for Caretaker Governments

Australia's caretaker government system is underpinned by both formal constitutional rules and informal political conventions. When an election is called, the government is expected to function in a caretaker capacity, ensuring that no major policy decisions or changes are made that could sway the electoral process. Australian caretaker governments are highly regulated by formal rules that prevent any government action that could unfairly influence the outcome of an election, and this regulation is supplemented by a strict political convention ensuring that the caretaker government operates in a non-partisan manner (Tiernan & Menzies, 2007).

Lesson for Pakistan: The Australian model offers a strong example of formal legal frameworks that restrict the powers of the caretaker government during election periods. Pakistan could draw from Australia's example by reinforcing constitutional provisions that limit the powers of caretaker governments to prevent them from influencing elections or bypassing democratic processes.

Nepal: Transition to Democracy and Caretaker Government Role

In Nepal, caretaker governments have been appointed during political transitions, particularly after the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of a federal democratic republic. The caretaker government's role in Nepal is designed to ensure a peaceful transition of power, maintain order, and organize elections. However, Nepal's political instability has also led to criticism of the caretaker system, as political parties often struggle to form consensus, and caretaker governments sometimes overstep their temporary mandate (Gurung, 2011).

Lesson for Pakistan: Nepal's experience highlights the potential for political instability during transitions and the need for a strong constitutional framework to guide caretaker governments. Pakistan could learn from Nepal's challenges by strengthening the independence of the election commission and ensuring that caretaker governments do not become entangled in political struggles.

IMPACT ON ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

The role of caretaker governments is crucial in ensuring the smooth conduct of elections and upholding the integrity of the electoral process. However, when caretaker governments exceed their constitutional mandate or fail to act impartially, they can have significant negative impacts on the electoral system, undermining public trust and distorting the outcomes. In this section, we explore the various consequences of caretaker governments on electoral integrity, focusing on election delays, manipulation, political bias, and the overall credibility of the election process.

Election Delays

Caretaker governments are meant to oversee the smooth organization of elections within a specific time frame as outlined in the constitution. However, when caretaker governments fail to meet the constitutional deadlines, as seen in Pakistan in 2023-2024, they can cause significant delays in holding elections. These delays are often justified by political instability or logistical challenges but may also be a result of intentional postponement to prolong the caretaker government's rule. Such delays can undermine the electoral process by raising doubts about the legitimacy of the government in power and eroding public confidence in the ability of democratic institutions to function. The prolonged absence of an elected government can create a power vacuum that may be exploited by unelected authorities, leading to a further loss of public faith in the political system (Homolková & MA, 2019).

Manipulation of Electoral Processes

Caretaker governments are expected to be neutral entities, ensuring that the election process is fair and transparent. However, in some instances, caretaker governments may engage in activities that manipulate the electoral environment. This can include favoring certain political parties, controlling media coverage, influencing the electoral commission, or making decisions that alter the balance of power before elections are held. In countries with fragile political systems, such manipulation can be subtle yet effective, tilting the electoral playing field in favor of specific interests or political entities. For example, if the caretaker government controls key state resources, such as media, law enforcement, or administrative support, it may leverage these resources to suppress opposition, intimidate voters, or influence election outcomes. In Pakistan, the concern has been raised that certain factions within the caretaker government may act as surrogates for powerful political or military elites, undermining the impartiality of the electoral process. Such manipulation, whether overt or covert, compromises the integrity of the elections and may lead to the declaration of election results that do not reflect the true will of the people (Munir, 2024).

Political Bias and Lack of Neutrality

Despite their intended role as neutral administrators, caretaker governments are often subject to political pressures, particularly in countries with a high level of political polarization. This can lead to partiality in their actions, with caretaker governments showing favoritism toward specific political parties or candidates. In Pakistan, the appointment of caretaker governments has frequently been a source of controversy, with accusations that the caretaker administration is aligned with the interests of the political establishment or military, rather than remaining neutral. Political bias within the caretaker government can manifest in various forms, such as selective enforcement of laws, biased media coverage, or influencing key electoral decisions like the timing

of elections, the appointment of election commissioners, or the allocation of election resources. Such bias distorts the democratic process, as it prevents free and fair elections and leads to a lack of trust among the electorate (Asif et al., 2021).

Voter Confidence and Participation

The actions of a caretaker government can have a profound effect on voter confidence and participation. If the electorate perceives that the caretaker government is not acting impartially or is manipulating the electoral process, this can lead to a decline in voter turnout. A lack of trust in the fairness of the election can cause apathy among voters, resulting in lower participation, which in turn undermines the legitimacy of the election outcome. Furthermore, if political parties or candidates feel that the caretaker government is biased or not acting fairly, they may choose to boycott the elections or dispute the process, further diminishing the credibility of the election. In Pakistan, the political tensions surrounding the caretaker government's actions, particularly after the 2022 no-confidence motion and subsequent dissolution of assemblies, led to widespread protests and claims of unfair election processes, further eroding voter confidence (Ahmad et al., 2016).

Long-Term Damage to Democratic Institutions

The cumulative effect of these issues—election delays, manipulation, political bias, and diminished voter confidence—can have long-lasting consequences on the health of democracy in a country. When caretaker governments fail to uphold the integrity of the electoral process, it damages the credibility of not just the election itself but also the institutions that govern the democratic system, such as the election commission, the judiciary, and the legislature. In the long run, if these practices continue unchecked, they can lead to the erosion of democratic values, resulting in a situation where electoral processes are viewed as corrupt or ineffective. This can create a vicious cycle of distrust in the political system, ultimately undermining the very foundation of democracy (Jatoi et al., 2023).

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CARETAKER GOVERNMENTS

The prolonged presence of a caretaker government can have far-reaching implications not only on the political stability of a country but also on its economic health and international relations. A caretaker government, by design, is a temporary entity that is expected to manage day-to-day governance until a new, elected government takes charge. However, when caretaker governments overstay their constitutionally mandated time frame or fail to conduct free and fair elections, they can lead to political and economic instability, as well as strained foreign relations. This section will explore the political economy of caretaker governance, focusing on the broader consequences for governance, economic policy, and foreign relations, with particular reference to Pakistan.

Governance and Political Stability

The primary function of a caretaker government is to ensure that elections are held within a specified time frame. However, when these governments fail to hold elections within the constitutional limits, as seen in Pakistan during 2023-2024, they can severely undermine political

stability. The absence of an elected government creates a power vacuum, leading to uncertainty and a lack of accountability. In such a scenario, the caretaker government, often seen as a temporary arrangement, may struggle to effectively address urgent governance challenges or make long-term policy decisions, as its mandate is seen as limited and temporary. Furthermore, prolonged caretaker governance often weakens political institutions, as citizens lose trust in the ability of democratic structures to function properly. The lack of a representative government erodes public confidence in democratic processes, leading to increased political polarization, protests, and public dissatisfaction, as witnessed in Pakistan during the caretaker period following the dissolution of assemblies in early 2023 (Ali, 2020).

Economic Policy and Decision-Making

One of the most significant impacts of caretaker governments is on economic policy. Economic policies, especially those involving long-term planning or large-scale reforms, require stability, consistency, and clear mandates that only a fully elected government can provide. Caretaker governments, constrained by their temporary nature, lack the mandate to implement long-term policies or undertake significant economic reforms. In Pakistan, the absence of an elected government led to several key issues in economic management. Caretaker administrations, while focused on ensuring the smooth conduct of elections, are often unable to make critical decisions regarding fiscal policy, economic reforms, or budgetary allocations. The resulting economic uncertainty negatively impacts both domestic and foreign investments, as businesses and markets prefer the certainty of a fully functional government with clear economic goals. The failure to implement key economic reforms, coupled with the prolonged period of caretaker governance, can have a detrimental impact on a country's macroeconomic indicators, including inflation, unemployment, and foreign exchange reserves. In Pakistan's case, the absence of a legitimate government exacerbated the country's existing economic problems, including inflationary pressures, a depreciating currency, and a widening fiscal deficit. The lack of decisive leadership led to a stalling economy, with critical sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and services facing disruptions. Economic policies, particularly those related to tax reforms, trade agreements, and infrastructure development, were put on hold, further deepening the economic crisis (Hlouchek & Kopecek, 2014).

Impact on Foreign Relations

The presence of a caretaker government can also affect a country's foreign relations. International actors, including foreign governments, multinational corporations, and international organizations, prefer to engage with elected governments, which are seen as more legitimate and stable. Prolonged caretaker governance can raise doubts about the political stability of a country and lead to a deterioration in diplomatic ties, foreign investment, and international aid. In Pakistan, the political uncertainty caused by the prolonged caretaker government was mirrored in its foreign relations. The lack of a clear mandate and a fully functioning government led to reduced diplomatic engagement, particularly in the context of trade agreements, regional security issues, and foreign aid. Pakistan's foreign policy, which traditionally hinges on relationships with key international actors such as China, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, suffered from the lack of a strong political leadership that could navigate complex international issues. Moreover, the economic

challenges resulting from the prolonged caretaker period, including currency depreciation and trade imbalances, made Pakistan less attractive to international investors. The international community may view a country's inability to hold elections and form a stable government as a sign of internal instability, which can result in reduced foreign investment and limited access to global financial markets (Khan, 2017).

Impact on Pakistan's Economy

The prolonged absence of an elected government in Pakistan following the 2023 dissolution of assemblies has had serious consequences on the country's economic performance. Pakistan's economy, already facing challenges such as high inflation, a devalued currency, and a growing debt burden, has been further destabilized by political uncertainty. Key economic decisions, including the approval of new budgets, implementation of necessary structural reforms, and negotiations with international lenders like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have been delayed, exacerbating Pakistan's economic woes. Data shows that Pakistan's currency has depreciated significantly during the caretaker period, as the absence of an elected government has led to a lack of investor confidence. Inflation, especially food inflation, has soared, affecting the daily lives of millions of citizens. The failure to implement tax reforms or negotiating trade agreements has led to widening fiscal deficits, which further strained the country's foreign reserves. The lack of decisive leadership during the caretaker period has also hindered the country's ability to attract foreign investment, as businesses hesitate to make long-term commitments in a country where political uncertainty reigns. The delay in holding elections has meant that long-term policies aimed at addressing structural weaknesses in Pakistan's economy—such as reducing dependency on foreign loans, improving exports, and diversifying industrial output—have been put on hold (Williams, 2011).

PROPOSED REFORMS FOR STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

Strengthening democracy requires not only the enforcement of existing constitutional mandates but also the adaptation of legal frameworks to address emerging challenges in governance. In Pakistan, the prolonged period of caretaker governance in 2023-2024 exposed significant flaws in the constitutional framework, particularly regarding the functioning of caretaker governments. To prevent future occurrences of political instability and the undermining of democratic principles, several reforms can be proposed to strengthen the existing system, ensuring that caretaker governments fulfill their constitutional duties without overstepping their mandate (White, 2008).

One of the most critical issues during the caretaker period in Pakistan was the failure to hold elections within the stipulated time frame, and the lack of accountability for this delay. The judiciary, although instrumental in some decisions, such as determining the responsibility of the president and governors in setting election dates, lacked the sufficient power or willingness to ensure compliance with constitutional requirements. Therefore, judicial oversight of the caretaker government's functioning must be enhanced. Reforms should include strengthening judicial review, allowing courts to have a more proactive role in overseeing the caretaker government's adherence to constitutional timelines. Clear legal provisions can be established to ensure that

courts can issue binding orders, with penalties for non-compliance, in situations where the caretaker government fails to act in a timely manner. Moreover, an independent electoral body, separate from the caretaker government and the Election Commission, could be tasked with ensuring elections are held on time and in a free and fair manner. This body could act as a watchdog to prevent delays and monitor any unconstitutional actions by the caretaker administration (Alberts et al., 2021).

While Article 224 of the Pakistan Constitution provides a framework for the establishment of caretaker governments, the ambiguity in its implementation and the lack of specific timelines for elections leave room for misuse and delays. Clearer guidelines should be incorporated into the constitution to prevent political maneuvering by caretaker administrations. Amendments can be made to Article 224 to establish fixed election dates that cannot be altered by caretaker governments, presidents, or provincial governors. This would prevent delays caused by political interference and ensure that elections are held within the prescribed 60 to 90-day period. Additionally, a clear, non-extendable time limit should be defined for caretaker governments, ensuring that they do not remain in power longer than necessary. For instance, caretaker governments could be given no more than six months to oversee elections, with no extensions allowed under any circumstances (Velásquez & Gonzalez, 2010).

Free and fair elections are the bedrock of any functioning democracy. However, during the caretaker period, the delay in elections can be a sign of systemic weaknesses in electoral processes. Reforms to improve electoral integrity are essential for strengthening democracy. The Election Commission should be made more independent, with its funding and operations shielded from political interference. An autonomous Election Commission could ensure that elections are held on time and in a transparent, non-partisan manner. Electoral reforms should also focus on increasing voter awareness and participation, especially during transitional periods when public trust in the electoral process may be low. Public education campaigns could be launched to engage citizens and inform them about their rights and the importance of timely elections (Diamond, 1992).

Caretaker governments often operate with minimal scrutiny, as they are technically in power for a short time. However, this can lead to inefficient governance and even the abuse of power. To prevent this, robust accountability mechanisms should be introduced. A public accountability committee, comprising members from various political parties and civil society, could be formed to oversee the activities of the caretaker government. This committee would have the authority to review decisions made by the caretaker government and hold it accountable for any policy actions or expenditures. Additionally, to ensure that caretaker governments remain neutral and do not make political decisions that could affect upcoming elections, all decision-making processes should be made public, with clear justifications for policies and actions. Public hearings and online transparency platforms could be introduced for this purpose (Rudra, 2005).

Political stability during transitions is not just the responsibility of the caretaker government, but also of the political parties. Reforms should encourage political dialogue and consensus-building to prevent political deadlock and ensure smooth transitions. Political parties should be required to establish consultative committees that work together to decide on the election

timetable in advance, preventing disputes between political parties and the caretaker government about the dates. A formal conflict resolution framework should be developed, ideally under the aegis of the Election Commission, to handle disputes between political parties, the caretaker government, and the judiciary. This would help to resolve issues before they escalate into full-blown constitutional crises.

One of the most pressing issues during the caretaker period was the failure to hold elections on time, undermining the very principles of democracy. To reinforce these principles and ensure timely elections in the future, several measures should be implemented. A constitutional amendment could introduce strict penalties for any institution or individual responsible for delaying elections beyond the prescribed 90-day period. These penalties could include fines, disqualification from future public office, or even criminal charges in extreme cases. Furthermore, implementing automated election monitoring systems that track the progress of election preparations could help ensure that the necessary steps are taken on time. These systems would allow the Election Commission and other stakeholders to intervene if delays or issues arise (Benjamin, 2017).

The proposed reforms aim to address the systemic issues that allow caretaker governments to overstay their mandate and delay elections. By strengthening judicial oversight, improving the autonomy of the Election Commission, clarifying the constitutional framework, and fostering political dialogue, Pakistan can reinforce democratic principles and ensure that future transitions are smooth, timely, and constitutionally compliant. These reforms would not only strengthen Pakistan's democracy but also restore public confidence in its political institutions and governance systems.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the complex role of caretaker governments in Pakistan, specifically examining their impact on democracy, governance, and constitutional integrity. The prolonged caretaker period between 2023 and 2024 not only exposed weaknesses in Pakistan's political and constitutional systems but also underscored the fragility of its democratic transition mechanisms. A caretaker government, by design, should serve as a neutral and temporary entity tasked with overseeing the electoral process and maintaining stability. However, in Pakistan's case, the failure to adhere to constitutional timelines, coupled with the lack of effective oversight, resulted in a scenario that undermined democratic processes and fueled political instability. The key finding of this research is that while caretaker governments are an essential mechanism during transitional periods, their unchecked extension beyond constitutional limits and their involvement in political matters can destabilize democratic institutions. The absence of timely elections, combined with the misuse of power, poses a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the democratic system, impacting the public's trust and confidence in political institutions. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in the constitutional framework governing caretaker administrations, ensuring that their functions are strictly limited and elections are held within stipulated time frames.

Future research should delve deeper into the comparative analysis of caretaker governments in other democratic systems to identify global best practices that can be adapted to

Pakistan's unique context. Studies could explore the role of judicial oversight in caretaker administrations, analyzing how courts in other countries balance neutrality with accountability. Additionally, further investigation into the political economy of caretaker governments could offer insights into how prolonged caretaker governance affects economic stability, foreign relations, and public policy. Understanding the broader implications of caretaker governance on electoral integrity and political economy will provide valuable recommendations for improving Pakistan's democratic framework. Moreover, examining public perception and the political culture surrounding caretaker governments in Pakistan could yield insights into the societal impacts of prolonged transitional periods. Future studies might also explore the feasibility of introducing new reforms or constitutional amendments that ensure timely elections, enhanced transparency, and the full adherence to the rule of law. By conducting more focused research on these areas, Pakistan can better align its constitutional practices with democratic principles, ultimately strengthening the country's governance and political systems.

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