[**Transfer of power**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1692404/transfer-of-power)

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A KEY sign of political maturity and consolidation is the smooth and legitimate transfer of power among political opponents regularly. It results in political legitimacy and hence stability which then leads to improved governance and progress.

The US has a proud history of over 200 years of such transfers. Regionally, India and Sri Lanka have almost always had such transfers over 75 years. Yet, in some states this never happens, eg Sudan and Myanmar. Pakistan is like these states in rarely having smooth and legitimate transfer of power between two fairly elected parties in 75 years. This is a result both of the dubious manner in which chief executives came to power and were deposed. Four dictators won power in the country via force and lost it unnaturally through death or political pressure. None of the first eight PMs from Liaquat Ali Khan to Nurul Amin during 1947-71 in united Pakistan were elected by assemblies; they were appointed by heads of state. While Liaquat died in office, the rest left due to palace coups.

The 15 regular PMs after 1971 were all elected by assemblies. Bhutto was the first, but only after the failure to transfer power to Mujib led to separation. He was deposed via a coup. Eight other PMs were elected via assembly majorities won through dubious polls in 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2018; none completed a five-year term. Thus, only six PMs elected via polls in 1988, 2008 and 2013 and the vote of no-confidence in 2022 were fairly elected. But three of them were deposed via dubious presidential or judicial dismissals. The two partial-term PMs from 2008 and 2013 (Raja Pervez and Shahid Khaqan) completed the remainder of the tenure while the fate of the incumbent PM lies in balance. Ten out of our 15 national assemblies emerged from dubious polls while two (1947 and 1972) were extracted from assemblies elected for a larger state before partition. Thus, there has been only one smooth and legitimate transfer of power between two fairly elected parties in 75 years — in 2013.

The bulk of the blame for this sorry situation lies with Pindi for delaying or rigging polls. Out of our 15 national elections or referenda, it has allegedly partially or fully rigged 13 polls, but politicians only one (1977) and that too partially. Only the 2013 polls undertaken fully by civilians were largely free of organised national-level rigging (as reflected by the EU election report). The regime emerging from the only polls rigged by civilians (1977) lasted a few weeks while those winning via establishment-rigged polls lasted for years. But politicians did play key secondary roles in helping the establishment impede smooth transfer of power, eg PPP and PML-N in 1970s and 1990s.

PPP and PML-N learned their lesson during the Musharraf era.

Yet, both learnt their lessons during long years of exile under Musharraf. They displayed much greater maturity in ensuring the smooth and fair transfer of power at least federally if not provincially during 2008-2018 through electoral reforms that involved the consensus appointment of ECP and neutral interim caretaker members. Political tolerance and pluralism and progress on social laws were also higher than in any other eras. Major progress was achieved in rolling back terrorism inherited from Musharraf and in keeping balanced external ties. Economic progress and daily governance was poor yet better than in the hybrid era that followed. In my view, this was overall our best era/decade ever given the progress on the all-crucial and fundamental political sphere.

But this political evolution was rudely ended by those who have impeded smooth power transfers repeatedly since the 1950s, assisted by the new political kid on the block, the PTI. Leaving other parties behind, PTI has impeded a smooth transfer of power four times since 2014. This included its 2014 dharna coup attempt based on false charges of rigging in 2013 polls even though neutral observers had found them to be fair. It then colluded with the establishment to win unfairly in 2018 as shown in the 2018 EU election report. Thirdly, it attempted to illegally defeat the legitimate April 2022 vote of no-confidence. Finally, based on unproven charges of a US conspiracy, it is now aiming to topple the government through dharnas. Thus, its timeline since 2014 consists solely of ruling through dubious polls but still trying to topple fairly elected regimes through questionable means. However, the PTI succeeded only once in these four attempts (in 2018) when it was seen to have the establishment’s full support.

Oddly, then, the two biggest obstacles today to smooth power transfers are both middle-class-led entities while landed/commercial elite-led parties support such transfers. Until both change their politics, the prospects of fair transfers of power and hence political legitimacy, stability and progress remain dim.

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