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Understanding how the Pakistani Government Works

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Introduction

The effective functioning of a nation depends greatly on its system of government. In Pakistan, understanding how the government operates—both at the national and grassroots levels—is crucial for all citizens, students, policy enthusiasts, and anyone seeking to better grasp the structures that underpin daily life and long-term progress in the country. Despite being frequently in the public eye, the Pakistani governmental system is often misunderstood, with its nuances and complexities overshadowed by political developments or media headlines. This book aims to provide a clear, comprehensive, and accessible guide to how the Pakistani government actually works.

The structure of the Pakistani government is defined principally by the Constitution of 1973, which established the federal parliamentary democratic system. Pakistan is divided into multiple tiers of government: the federal or central government at the top, the provincial governments, and below them, the local governments. Each tier has its own framework, powers, and responsibilities, working together (sometimes in tension) to manage the country's affairs. The federal system was designed to allow local autonomy while maintaining national unity, a balance that remains a continuous work in progress.

Three main branches—executive, legislature, and judiciary—form the backbone of governance in Pakistan. The executive branch, led by the Prime Minister and the cabinet, is responsible for policy implementation and the everyday administration of the state. The legislature, comprising the bicameral Parliament (the National Assembly and Senate), crafts the laws that shape society and mediates between the varying interests of Pakistan's diverse regions. The judiciary ensures justice, interprets laws, and acts as a crucial check on the exercise of governmental powers.

This book also explores the unique features and challenges within the provincial and local systems in Pakistan. The provincial governments are vital actors, managing vast territories and populations within their own constitutional boundaries. Local governments, meanwhile, represent the face of governance most familiar to ordinary citizens—dealing directly with everything from education and health to infrastructure and municipal services. The ongoing evolution of these local bodies highlights both the promise and the difficulties of decentralization in Pakistan.

A hallmark of Pakistani governance is its electoral system—a complex arrangement with direct and indirect elections at multiple levels, reserved seats for women and minorities, and rigorous oversight by constitutional bodies. The interaction of political parties, government ministries, and administrative services creates a vibrant (if sometimes tumultuous) political landscape.

Throughout Pakistan's history, the relationship between the federal government and the provinces has shaped debates about identity, resources, and representation. This book will shed light on these relations, examining reforms like the 18th Amendment, and situating Pakistan's government in a global context. By the end of this volume, readers will have a solid grounding in the principles, institutions, and real-world workings of the Pakistani governing system.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Evolution of the Pakistani Government

To truly grasp how the Pakistani government operates today, one must take a journey through its past. The structures, institutions, and even the underlying philosophy of governance in Pakistan are deeply rooted in its history, a narrative marked by periods of democratic aspiration, constitutional crises, and military interventions. It's a story that begins long before the country's formal birth in 1947.

The constitutional history of the land that became Pakistan is intertwined with the legacy of British colonial rule in India. The British introduced a system of governance that included legislative councils and a degree of provincial autonomy, particularly through the Government of India Act 1935. This Act served as a crucial framework, influencing the initial governmental setup of both India and Pakistan upon independence. It was, in fact, adopted as the interim constitution for Pakistan in 1947, providing a starting point for the newly formed nation.

Upon independence, Pakistan faced the monumental task of not only establishing a functional administration from scratch but also drafting a permanent constitution. The first Constituent Assembly was formed, inheriting members from the pre-partition legislative bodies. This assembly was tasked with the dual role of serving as the provisional legislature and drafting the constitution. It was a challenging period, marked by political instability, leadership changes, and the immense difficulties of nation-building.

A significant early step in the constitution-making process was the passing of the Objectives Resolution in March 1949. Moved by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, this resolution outlined the foundational principles and ideals for the future constitution. It declared that sovereignty belonged to Almighty Allah but would be exercised by the people of Pakistan within the limits prescribed by Him, a concept that aimed to blend Islamic principles with democratic governance. The resolution also emphasized democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance, and social justice as enunciated by Islam, and pledged safeguards for minorities. Though it became a cornerstone of future constitutions, its interpretation and application would remain subjects of debate for decades.

Despite the adoption of the Objectives Resolution, the path to a permanent constitution was anything but smooth. Differences in opinion regarding federalism, provincial representation (particularly the sensitive issue of parity between East and West Pakistan), and the role of Islam led to protracted delays. It took nine long years,

several changes in government, and the work of two constituent assemblies before Pakistan finally adopted its first constitution in 1956.

The 1956 Constitution established Pakistan as an Islamic Republic with a parliamentary form of government. It provided for a unicameral legislature, the National Assembly, with equal representation for East and West Pakistan. The executive authority was vested in a cabinet headed by the Prime Minister, who was responsible to the legislature. The President was the head of state, elected by an electoral college, and was largely a ceremonial figure. The constitution also included provisions for fundamental rights and an independent judiciary.

However, the 1956 Constitution proved to be short-lived. Political instability continued, marked by frequent changes in prime ministers and ministries. In October 1958, citing a breakdown of law and order and political chaos, President Iskander Mirza abrogated the constitution and imposed martial law. Shortly thereafter, General Ayub Khan, the Army Chief, took over from Mirza, consolidating power and ushering in a new era of military rule.

Ayub Khan's regime brought about significant changes to the governmental structure. In 1962, he promulgated a new constitution, moving away from the parliamentary system towards a presidential one. The 1962 Constitution vested considerable executive authority in the President, who was to be elected by an electoral college known as the Basic Democrats, a system of local government bodies introduced by Ayub Khan. The legislature became unicameral again, but its powers were significantly curtailed compared to the President's. While maintaining a federal form, the system under the 1962 Constitution was highly centralized, with governors appointed by the President wielding considerable power in the provinces.

The 1962 Constitution, despite attempts to address regional disparities by making Dacca the second capital and recognizing both Urdu and Bengali as national languages, failed to resolve the deep-seated political and economic grievances, particularly in East Pakistan. Growing dissatisfaction, coupled with political unrest and the 1965 war with India, weakened Ayub Khan's grip on power. In 1969, he stepped down and handed over authority to Army Chief General Yahya Khan, who imposed martial law and abrogated the 1962 Constitution.

The period under Yahya Khan was marked by the lead-up to the 1970 general elections, the first in Pakistan's history based on adult universal suffrage. The election results highlighted the deep political divisions, with the Awami League sweeping the vote in East Pakistan on a platform of greater autonomy, while the Pakistan Peoples Party emerged as the dominant force in West Pakistan. The failure to reach a political settlement following these results, coupled with escalating tensions and a brutal military crackdown in East Pakistan, led to the tragic events of 1971 and the secession of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh.

The loss of East Pakistan was a profound national trauma that fundamentally reshaped the country's political landscape and led to a renewed effort to forge a national consensus. With Zulfikar Ali Bhutto taking charge, the remaining West Pakistan parts of the country embarked on the process of drafting a new constitution. The National Assembly, elected in 1970 but now representing only West Pakistan, served as the constituent assembly. After extensive deliberations and negotiations involving various political parties, a consensus was finally reached, resulting in the adoption of the 1973 Constitution.

The 1973 Constitution marked a return to a federal parliamentary democratic system. It significantly strengthened the role of the Prime Minister as the head of government, while the President became a largely ceremonial head of state, acting on the Prime Minister's advice. It introduced a bicameral legislature, the Parliament, consisting of the National Assembly (lower house) with representation based on population, and the Senate (upper house) with equal representation for the provinces, designed to address concerns about provincial equality. The constitution also enshrined fundamental rights, provided for an independent judiciary, and declared Islam as the state religion.

However, the democratic era ushered in by the 1973 Constitution was once again interrupted by military rule. In July 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government, imposed martial law, and suspended the constitution. Zia's eleven-year rule saw significant changes, including a process of Islamization and amendments to the constitution that altered the balance of power between the President and the Prime Minister. The most notable of these was the Eighth Amendment, passed in 1985, which, among other things, granted the President discretionary powers to dissolve the National Assembly, effectively creating a semi-presidential system. This amendment was a compromise that allowed for the revival of the constitution and the lifting of martial law, but at the cost of significantly enhancing presidential authority.

Following Zia's death in 1988, Pakistan returned to a form of democracy, but the Eighth Amendment's provisions led to a decade of political instability, with presidents frequently using their power to dissolve governments, leading to multiple elections. Attempts were made to repeal the Eighth Amendment, and while some of its effects were reversed by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1997, the cycle of political maneuvering and instability continued.

The democratic interlude was again cut short in 1999 when General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a military coup. Musharraf suspended the constitution and later introduced amendments, notably the Seventeenth Amendment in 2003, which largely restored the powers of the President that had been curtailed by the Thirteenth Amendment, including the power to dissolve the National Assembly. This period saw a continuation of the strong presidential influence over the parliamentary system.

Musharraf's rule ended in 2008 with the return to civilian government. The subsequent democratic governments embarked on a process of constitutional reform aimed at strengthening parliamentary democracy and provincial autonomy. This culminated in the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 2010. The Eighteenth Amendment was a landmark achievement, passed with broad political consensus. It significantly curtailed the powers of the President, particularly repealing the controversial Article 58(2)(b) which allowed the President to dissolve the National Assembly. It also devolved substantial powers and responsibilities to the provinces, reinforcing the federal character of the state and addressing long-standing demands for greater provincial autonomy. The amendment also brought changes related to the judiciary and the election commission, aiming to enhance their independence and transparency.

The historical journey of Pakistan's government has been one of navigating complex challenges, balancing competing interests, and striving to establish a stable and effective system of governance. From the initial reliance on inherited colonial structures and the struggle to draft a foundational document, through periods of constitutional experimentation and military interventions, to the restoration and significant amendment of the 1973 Constitution, each era has left its mark. The current governmental framework is a product of this evolutionary process, reflecting both continuity and change, and setting the stage for the ongoing development of democracy and federalism in the country.

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