Politics of Faith, Ethnonationalism and Change: A History of General Elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (1988 - 2018)

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Abstract

Using a longitudinal historical comparison and the key drivers working behind, this paper provides a detailed account and analysis of the general elections (1988 - 2018) held in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly NWFP). The study explores the unique socio-political prime movers that define the KP province's voting behavior. The analysis indicates the transition from a period of unstable coalition governments and frequent dissolutions of the successive parliaments to the eventual emergence and winning of popular will by single-party. Based on analysis of secondary and published data, key themes are included the impact of regional security issues and concerns (specifically the Afghan conflict and the rise of militancy in the KP regions), the voter turnout and party manifestoes, the alleged manipulative role of the security establishment in electoral processes, and the historic transitions of power between various civilian administrations. The findings suggest that while incumbency and governance remain central to politics and elections, the KP electorate is uniquely vulnerable to external geopolitical factors and pressures and internal security discourses. The security narratives, both internal and external, frequently influence the electoral results and set in dramatic shifts in the KP's power structure.

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Introduction

The electoral history of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province offers an interesting case study in Pakistan's electoral politics. Sometimes labelled as an electoral lab, the KP serves as a critical barometer for the national democratic health. The sudden end of Zia-ul-Haq's military era, inaugurated several phases of political experiments in the KP province leading to turbulent paths characterized by shifting alliances, the rise of

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religious forces, and the enduring challenge of internal militancy and regional conflicts. The restoration of civilian rule in 1988 followed a decade of military control, commencing with the dismissal of the National and Provincial assemblies by General Zia in May 1988. General Zia's sudden death in a plane crash opened up new spaces for political activity and paved the way for the return of party-based democracy under the presidency of Ghulam Ishaq Khan.

In KP, during the late 1980s and the 1990s, the electoral map of the province was mainly defined by a tough competition between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and various right-wing or ethnonationalist alliances. The 1988 elections created a pattern of coalition based governance, where parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) and the alliance of right wing parties (Islami Jamhoori Ittehad - IJI) competed for provincial power. This era witnessed frequent institutional instability. In 1990, for instance, Benazir Bhutto's government was dismissed on allegations of corruption and inefficiency underscored the precarious nature of civilian authority. Despite reclaiming political and democratic space, the political parties remained vulnerable to both internal fissures and external interventions by the establishment.

It is noteworthy that the turn of the millennium paved the way for significant structural and ideological shifts in the KP. The 2002 general elections, for instance, were conducted under the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf, who introduced some controversial conditions including the graduation requirement for the candidates, which effectively excluded a significant number of experienced politicians from contesting elections. This institutional constraint provided favorable playing field to religious constituency ensuring the rise of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). The MMA capitalized on anti-American sentiment following the US invasion of Afghanistan. The success of religious parties' alliance in 2002 general elections was not merely a matter of faith-based political ideology; it was deeply intertwined with the grievances of Pashtuns in KP who felt alienated and targeted by the war on terror.

In the subsequent years, the KP province and the entire Pashtun belt faced unprecedented security threats that fundamentally changed the democratic process in the region. The 2008 general elections were held amidst a wave of suicide attacks and political crises, including the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. By 2013, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) openly targeted the ANP, MQM, and PPP, and other secular social forces forcing their leaders into 'virtual house arrest' and disrupting their ability to campaign in the elections. Despite this pervasive violence in KP, it is remarkable to mention that the 2013

general elections were held and the power transition took place smoothly.

The latest phase of electoral process in KP's political history is marked by the 2018 and 2024 general elections, where the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) broke the province's long-standing tradition of rotating power by securing a consecutive and overwhelming mandate. This shift from fragmented coalitions to single-party dominance suggests a maturing or perhaps a reconfiguring of the provincial electorate. However, as with previous phases, the 2018 and 2024 results were marred by widespread allegations of manipulation and protests from nearly all opposition parties. By examining these electoral cycles from 1988 to 2018, this paper seeks to explain how Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has moved from a province/frontier of instability to a central pillar of Pakistan's contemporary political discourse.

Theory and Method

Methodologically, the paper employs a comparative historical approach, specifically a 'within-case diachronic comparison'. This enables researchers carrying out a systematic analysis of the electoral evolution of KP through eight consecutive general elections from 1988 to 2018. Treating the province a single unit of analysis, this approach enables examining how its political landscape transformed across distinct chronological moments. Moreover, by comparing the electoral results and the underlying socio-political drivers of each election cycle, the paper identifies the shifting fortunes of key political forces, including secular ethnonationalists like the Awami National Party (ANP), traditional power brokers like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and newer populist or religious forces. This longitudinal comparison, instead of a single-election study, is significant for making sense of the underlying mechanisms of political transition. To enrich the interpretation of these key shifts, the paper is anchored in the theoretical framework of Historical Institutionalism,[1] which focuses on the concepts of 'path

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[1]   Kathleen Thelen, 'Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2:1 (1999), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.369.

dependency'[2] and 'critical junctures'. The political and electoral history of KP is presented as a series of institutional shifts/ruptures where security-driven external shocks or internal policy shifts fundamentally redirected the provincial trajectory. For instance, the sudden death of General Zia-ul-Haq and the subsequent restoration of partisan democracy in 1988 served as a critical juncture that allowed for the return of civilian rule. In a similar fashion, the 2002 elections are analyzed as a transformative event where institutional barriers—such as the graduation requirement for candidates—coupled with the regional fallout of the US-led war in Afghanistan, created a socio-political environment that marginalized secular and ethnonationalist parties and strengthened the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).

Furthermore, the paper incorporates a Civil-Military Relations lens, often tied with the notion of the 'Garrison State,' to explain the frequent influence and intervention of the security establishment of electoral results. The study provides significant evidence of how the security establishment frequently intervened to form specific alliances and suppress other narratives, notably in the 1990, 2002, and 2018 elections. This theoretical lens accounts for the KP's unique position as a frontier territory where national security choices often supersede democratic norms. The same line of reasoning and analysis is extended to the 2013 elections showing how the targeted violence of the TTP against ANP created an uneven playing field. The violence thus imposed a violent institutional constraint that favored certain ideologies over others. The transition from the fragile electoral alliances of the 1990s to the salience of MMA, and ultimately the triumph of populist PTI, highlights the province's precarity to central authority and global pressures. By utilizing path dependency, the paper argues that the electoral victory and subsequent continued dominance achieved by the PTI in 2018 and 2024, was not a random isolated event but a result of cumulative grievance and discontent with previous governance models and a strategic misappropriation of the security-state narrative in Pakistan. Finally, the integration of comparative historical method with historical institutionalism offers a useful narrative of how KP electoral politics moved from a fragmented and unstable configuration toward a more consolidated, single-party political structure.

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[2]   James Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', *Theory and Society*, 29: 4 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007113830879.

Longitudinal Historical Account of General Elections in KP
The Return of Civilian Rule and the 1988 General Elections

As a result of continued frictions between the then President General Zia and the then Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo, the former dismissed National Assembly and the assemblies of the four provinces on 29th May 1988[3] and announced general elections to be held in November 1988. However, General Zia died in a plane crash before the elections could be held. After General Zia's death, Chairman Senate Ghulam Ishaq Khan became the president of Pakistan and announced that the elections will be held as per schedule.[4] According to Rasul Bakhsh Rais, General Zia's death in C-30 crash gave him an honorable exit from Pakistan's political scene otherwise he would have confronted an active and enormously hostile opposition after the elections that he had announced.[5]

The election was mainly a competition between PPP and the rest. Most of the well-known political parties had joined one of the three alliances against PPP.[6] These alliances were Pakistan Awami Ittehad (PAI) or Pakistan People's Alliance (PPA),[7] Left and Democratic Front (LDF), and Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI). ANP and Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) were the two prominent political parties that did not join any alliance against PPP and contested the elections independently.[8] Among these alliances, IJI was the most important one which consisted of Pakistan Muslim League, National Peoples Party, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam, Markazi Jamiat Ahle-e-Hadith (MJAH), Independent Parliamentary Group, Jamiat-e-Mashaikh Pakistan, and Hezb-e-Jehad.[9]

After 1977 elections, the leadership of PML-Q passed from Khan Abdul Qayyum Khan to Kunwar Qutubuddin who then merged the

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[3] Rasul B. Rais, 'Pakistan in 1988: From Command to Conciliation Politics', *Asian Survey* 29:2 (1989), 201.

[4] Mushtaq Ahmed, 'Legitimacy Crises in Pakistan: A Comparative Study of Political Behaviour', *Journal of Political Studies*, 11 (2007), 10.

[5] Rasul B. Rais, *op.cit*., 201.

[6] Muhammad Yaqub Akhter, 'Electoral Politics and Corruption under Civilian Rule in Post-1971 Pakistan', *South Asian Survey*, 11:1 (2004), 79.

[7] Muhammad Mumtaz Ali Khan and Mazher Hussain, 'Pakistan General Elections 1988: An Analytical Study on the 'Bipolarization' of the National Electorate', *Pakistan Vision,* 22:1 (2021), 168.

[8] Muhammab Yaqub Akhter, *op.cit*., 79.

[9] Islami Jamhoori Ittehad, *Election Manifesto* (Islamabad: Islami Jamhoori Ittehad, 1988), 4, https://kurzman.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1410/2011/06/IJI-1988.pdf.

party in Pakistan Muslim League-Functional[10] and thus it ceased to be a separate and major force in the electoral politics of NWFP. Thus, PPP, IJI, JUI-F, and ANP[11] were the main contenders in the 1988 elections in NWFP.

Provincial autonomy has always been one of the major slogans of ANP. Another important component of its manifesto for the 1988 elections was the solution of Afghan issue. It was of the view that the Afghan issue can only be resolved by engaging all segments of the Afghan society. This issue later proved to be a major factor that created cracks in the coalition government of PPP and ANP as the latter ultimately resigned from the cabinet. The situation reached such a point that the then ANP chief Wali Khan even remarked that ISI was prolonging the Afghan conflict due to which people of Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa both suffered.[12] JUI-F's main slogan in successive elections has been implementation of Sharia in the country.

PPP and IJI emerged with the largest number of seats at both provincial and national level in NWFP. In NA elections, IJI won 8 seats, PPP 9, JUI-F 3, ANP 2, and JUI-Darkhasti 1 while three seats were won by independents. In provincial elections, ANP won 13, PPP 21, IJI 26, and JUI-F 2 seats while 18 seats were won by independents[13]

As a result of the elections, PPP, in coalition with ANP and independents formed a government in NWFP.[14] PPP and ANP reached an agreement according to which the provincial government was to be led by PPP while ANP had to get the slot of governor. Thus, Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao became the chief minister of the province.[15] However, due to non-fulfillment of promises by PPP, especially with regard to the appointment of ANP governor, ANP not only withdrew

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[10] K.S. Yaqubi, *Khan-e-Azam ki yadein* (Memories of Khan-e-Azam) (Peshawar: Diyar Khan Foundation, 2018).

[11] The current Awami National Party (ANP) was formed in 1986 and thus the 1988 election was its first contest. It emerged from the National Awami Party (NAP).

[12] M. Javaid Akhter, 'Politics of Reconciliation and Accommodation: A Study of Benazir Bhutto's First Era of Democratic Government (1988–1990)', *Journal of Political Studies* 16 (2009), 76.

[13] Election Commission of Pakistan, *Report on the General Elections 1988*, vol. 3, *Detailed Result of Election* (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, n.d.).

[14] M.S. Ahmad, 'Electoral Politics in NWFP (1988–1999)' (PhD diss., Quaid-i-Azam University, 2010).

[15] Shaikh Aziz, 'Leaf from History: Politics and Lies,' *Dawn*, August 7, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1275386.

from the coalition but also joined hands with IJI to topple the government through no confidence motion though this could not happen due to emergence of forward block within IJI. IJI, being the single largest political force within the assembly, would have formed government in NWFP had it paid proper attention to the independents who were won over by PPP to form its government. Internal divisions within IJI were the major reason for this failure.[16]

The 1990 General Elections

In August 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, with the consent of army leadership, dismissed Benazir Bhutto's Government by invoking constitutional amendment introduced by General Zia.[17] It was dismissed on charges of corruption, nepotism, failure to maintain law and order situation and govern the country efficiently. Thus, new elections were announced that were held on 24th October 1990.[18]

The PPP, which also had incumbency burden on its shoulders, formed an alliance, Pakistan Democratic Alliance (PDA), with Tehreek-e-Istaqlal, Pakistan Muslim League Malik Qasim Group, and Tehreek-i-Nafaz-i-Fiqah-i-Jafria.[19] On the other hand, IJI not only remained intact but also wanted to include parties like Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP) and JUI-F in Balochistan, ANP in NWFP, and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) in Sindh in its fold. However, due to opposition from some elements within IJI like JI and Junejo and some other reasons it could not be done. ANP, MQM, and Majlis-e Ahrar agreed not only to cooperate with each other but also with IJI. However, they preferred a free hand to form their election strategies according to their programs. As a result, it was agreed that IJI will enter into seat adjustment with these parties and some independents. Thus, a grand alliance was formed by the IJI and six other parties. Except for the desire to defeat PPP, there was very less common between IJI on the one hand and parties like ANP, JWP, and MQM, on the other.[20] IJI and ANP formally announced their electoral alliance on 11 September 1990, as a result of which they did not field candidates against each other in NWFP. Out of 26 NA seats, IJI

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16 Rahat Zubair Malik, *Politics of Alliances: A Case Study of Islami Jamhoori Ittehad*, (PhD diss., Quaid-i-Azam University, 2014), 210.

17 David Taylor, 'Parties, Elections, and Democracy in Pakistan,' *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 30:1 (1992), 96.

18 Muhammad Yaqub Akhter, *op.cit.*, 80.

19 Tahir Mehdi, 'An Overview of 1990 General Elections: The Game Gets Dirtier', *Dawn*, 11 April 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/798158/an-overview-of-1990-general-elections-the-game-gets-dirtier.

20 Rahat Zubair Malik, *op.cit.,* 336.

contested elections on 19 seats while ANP on 7 seats. IJI also made seat adjustments on provincial seats with JUI-F and ANP, but due to differences among IJI members, candidates of these parties contested against each other on many seats. IJI's decision to support ANP's Ghulam Ahmad Bilour from Peshawar also caused tensions within the alliance as some Pakistan Muslim League leaders thought Peshawar to be one of their strongholds in the province and thus, they wanted IJI ticket from the metropolitan.[21]

In provincial elections, IJI won 32 seats, ANP 23, PPP 6, JUI-F 2, and independents 17. In the National Assembly elections, ANP secured 6 seats, PPP 5, IJI 8, JUI-F 4, and independents 3.[22] Though there was an electoral alliance between ANP and IJI, there always remained tensions between IJI's Jamaat-e-Islami and ANP. They had sharp differences over issues like enforcement of Sharia, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. ANP was willing to accept Afzal Khan as the chief minister while JI wanted Gen. Retired Fazle Haq to be nominated for the slot. After long deliberations, Afzal Khan was elected as chief minister.[23]

It was his defeat at the hands of a joint candidate of PPP and JUI-F in 1990 elections that forced ANP chief and seasoned politician Abdul Wali Khan to quit electoral politics for ever.[24] He blamed the establishment, the then President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, PPP, JI (which was part of IJI with which ANP had seat adjustment), and some dissenters within ANP for his defeat. He alleged that Gulbadin Hekmatyar, the chief of Afghanistan's Hizb-e-Islami party, would accompany his rival candidate Maulana Hassan Jan during his election campaign and that Hekmatyar also distributed money among prayer leaders in the constituency to influence voters. Abdul Wali Khan said that his National Assembly constituency was divided into five provincial constituencies out of which his party won four, which suggests that he was defeated through rigging.[25]

The 1990 elections are considered to be among the most manipulated elections in Pakistan. The then ISI chief Asad Durrani in his

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21 *Ibid.,* 343.
22 Election Commission of Pakistan, Report on the General Elections 1990, vol. 2, *Detailed Result of Election* (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, 1991).
23 Rahat Zubair Malik, *op.cit.,* 368.
24 Faiz Muhammad Khan, 'Voter Maturity in Charsadda', *Dawn*, 22 April 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/1024879/voter-maturity-in-charsadda.
25 Safiullah Khan Marwat, 'Abdul Wali Khan: A Political Study (1942–1990)' (PhD diss., International Islamic University, 2015).

written reply submitted to the Supreme Court confessed the distribution of money for election campaign among IJI leaders.[26] Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, who was caretaker prime minister during 1990 elections, in January 1991 told media that several well-known political figures lost their seats because the 'powers that be' did not want them to return to the National Assembly. He confessed that he knew about the conspiracy, but he was helpless. Similarly, a foreign election observation team consisting of two French magistrates and two lawyers observed that 'highly sophisticated fraud' distorted the results of the election.[27] This kind of confession naturally supports Wali Khan's allegations about rigging.

Accepting the Unacceptable: The 1993 General Elections

The assemblies elected in 1990 also could not complete their term and thus new elections were announced.[28] The elections for National Assembly and provincial assemblies were held on October 6 and 9, 1993, respectively.[29]

For the 1993 elections, there emerged three major alliances of Islamic parties and groups. The first one was Islami Jamhoori Mahaz (IJM-Islamic Democratic Front) formed by Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) with Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan-Noorani (JUP-N). The second Islamic alliance was Pakistan Islamic Front (PIF) formed by Jamaat-e-Islami[30] as its leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed wanted to make JI as the third alternative political force after PPP and PML-N.[31] The third Islamic alliance was Muttahida Deeni Mahaz (MDM) consisting of 24 religious groups and factions led by Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Islam-Sami (JUI-S).[32] All these three alliances had considerable following in NWFP.

In NWFP, the three alliances collectively won only 5 National Assembly and 4 provincial assembly seats. In the National Assembly,

[26]   Rahat Zubair Malik, *op.cit.,* 337.
[27]   Anwar H. Syed, 'The Pakistan People's Party and the Punjab', *Asian Survey* 31:7 (1991), 589-90.
[28]   Muhammad Yaqub Akhter, *op.cit*., 82-83.
[29]   Tahir Amin, 'Pakistan in 1993: Some Dramatic Changes', *Asian Survey* 34:2 (1994), 195.
[30]   Hassan N. Gardezi, 'Politics of Religion in Pakistan's Elections: An Assessment,' *South Asia Bulletin* 14:1 (1994), 110-12.
[31]   Manzoor Khan Afridi, Tabi Ullah, and Uzma Gul, 'Electoral Politics of Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (1987–2009)', *Global Social Sciences Review* 1:1 (2016), 65, https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2016(I-I).05.
[32]   Church World Service - Pakistan/Afghanistan, *National Assembly Elections in Pakistan 1970–2008: A Compendium of Elections Related Facts and Statistics* (Islamabad: CWS-P/A, 2010), 361.

PML-N's 10 seats were highest among all, PPP won 6, ANP 3, IJM 2, MDM 1, PIF 2, Pakhtun Qaumi Party 1, and independent 1. At provincial level, out of 74 seats for which results are available on ECP's website, PPP and ANP won 20 seats each, PML-N 16, PIF 3, PML-J 3, IJM 1, and independents 11.[33] PPP and PML-N were the two parties that performed very well at both levels while ANP performed well in provincial assembly elections but its performance in National Assembly elections was poor. Like in 1990, ANP and PML-N formed a coalition government with Pir Sabir Shah as the chief minister[34]

The Coming of Two-Third Majority: The 1997 General Elections
The PPP government elected in 1993 was also dismissed by the then President Farooq Ahmad Leghari on 5th November 1996 on charges of corruption and inefficiency and announced fresh elections.[35] Thus, after the Supreme Court upheld the presidential order to dissolve the government, new elections were held on February 3, 1997.[36]

The 1997 elections had some important new aspects. It was for the first time that elections to the National Assembly and provincial assemblies were held on the same day, February 3.[37] Newly formed Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party for the first time took part in elections. It contested on 134 seats but could not win any seat with its chief and the former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan defeated on nine seats. Another important aspect of these elections was the extension of adult franchise to the erstwhile FATA. Earlier, some 37,000 state-nominated elders would elect members of the National Assembly from the area.[38]

In NWFP, ANP and PML-N almost swept the elections. ANP won 10 out of 26 National Assembly seats while PML-N won 15. The remaining one was won by an independent candidate. Out of 74

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[33]   Election Commission of Pakistan, *Constituency wise detailed Result (1988 - 1997)*, n.d. Available at https://ecp.gov.pk/general-elections-1988-1997.

[34]   Muhammad Javaid Akhter, 'Dilemma of Political Culture: A Case Study of Pakistan (1987–1997)' (PhD diss., Bahauddin Zakariya University, 2010), 103.

[35]   Tahir Mehdi, 'An Overview of 1997 General Elections: PML-N Returns with a Bang', *Dawn*, 1 April 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/795552.

[36]   Waqar-un-Nisa, Muhammad Umar, and Naeemullah Khan, 'Electoral Mandate of PML-N: A Critical Analysis of 1997 General Elections', Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL) 7:2 (July 2021), 288, https://pjsel.jehanf.com/index.php/journal/article/view/667.

[37]   Muhammad Javaid Akhter, 'Dilemma of Political Culture…', *op.cit.*, 105.

[38]   Tahir Mehdi, 'An Overview of 1997…', *op.cit.*

provincial assembly constituencies' results available on ECP website, ANP won 29 and PML-N 31 seats while 10 seats were secured by independents. The performance of PPP and JUI-F was extremely poor at both national and provincial levels as they failed to win any National Assembly seat while at provincial level, they won 5 and 1 seat, respectively.[39] ANP formed a coalition government with PML-N and got enough share in the cabinet.[40]

Emergence of a New Politico-Religious Force: The 2002 General Elections

Following the overthrow of Nawaz Sharif's government in 1999, fresh elections were held in the country in October 2002. The 2002 elections were different from 1988-1997 elections in many ways. The voting age was lowered to 18 years from 21, campaign duration was reduced from 90 to 40 days.[41] The seats of National Assembly, Senate, and provincial assemblies were increased in the light of 1998 census, separate electorate was replaced with joint electorate and seats were reserved for women and minorities in all assemblies.[42] Candidates for National Assembly and provincial assemblies were required to have at least bachelor or equivalent degree recognized by the University Grants Commission.[43] This condition of graduation qualification for contesting elections excluded about 97% of the population of the country from contesting elections.[44] This requirement hardly had any parallel in the world as most democratic countries impose conditions of age, citizenship, nomination fee, and in some cases petition requirements also known as signature

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[39]   Election Commission of Pakistan, *Constituency wise detailed Result (1988 - 1997).*

[40]   Mohammad Waseem, 'The 1997 Elections in Pakistan,' *Electoral Studies* 17:1 (1998), 131.

[41]   Zafar Afaq Ansari and Abdul Rashid Moten, 'From Crisis to Crisis: Musharraf's Personal Rule and the 2002 Elections in Pakistan', *The Muslim World*, 93:3-4 (2003).

[42]   Ian Talbot, 'Pakistan in 2002: Democracy, Terrorism, and Brinkmanship', *Asian Survey*, 43:1 (2003), 205.

[43]   Election Commission of Pakistan, 'Chief Executives Order No. 7 of 2002' (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, 2002), art. 8A, available at https://ecp.gov.pk/chief-executives-order-no7-of-2002

[44]   Zafar Afaq Ansari and Abdul Rashid Moten, *op.cit*.

requirements which require certain number of signatures for nomination of a candidate.[45]

Several candidates, for fulfilling this requirement, submitted fake degrees with several of them later de-seated for doing fraud.[46] Thus, the new conditions for contesting elections expelled many seasoned and popular politicians from the contest and even in some cases it was the covering candidates who contested the elections in place of the original candidates.[47] The 2002 general elections were also marked by the exclusion of former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto from the electoral process.[48]

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, MMA won 29 NA seats while 48 out of 99 general seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly. In Balochistan Assembly, it won the highest number of seats (13), while in Sindh and Punjab assemblies it won only 10 and 11 seats, respectively.[49] JUI-F emerged as the major player in MMA as it won 41 out of MMA's 45 National Assembly seats and 29 out of MMA's 48 provincial assembly seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. JUI-S won only two seats.[50]

The MMA gains in NWFP were mainly at the expense of ANP and PML-N. In the 1997 elections, the two collectively won 60 provincial and 25 National Assembly seats.[51] In the 2002 elections, they collectively won 8 provincial seats and no National Assembly seat.[52] Even ANP chief Asfandyar Wali Khan failed to win his ancestral

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[45]   Madiha Afzal, 'Do Barriers to Candidacy Reduce Political Competition? Evidence from a Bachelor's Degree Requirement for Legislators in Pakistan', *Public Choice,* 161:1-2 (2014), 52.

[46]   Matthew J. Nelson, *Countries at the Crossroads: Pakistan (2006–2011)* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2011).

[47]   Massoud Ansari, 'A Foregone Conclusion?', Newsline, October 2002, https://newslinemagazine.com/magazine/a-foregone-conclusion-2/.

[48]   Farmanullah, 'Voting Behaviour in Pakistan: A Case Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 2008 General Elections' (PhD diss., University of Peshawar, 2014), 3.

[49]   Kamran Aziz Khan, '2002 Elections in Pakistan: A Reappraisal', *Journal of Political Studies*, 18:1 (2003), 101.

[50]   International Crisis Group, Pakistan: *The Mullahs and the Military, Asia Report No. 49* (Brussels/Islamabad: International Crisis Group, 2003), 11, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/49-pakistan-the-mullahs-and-the-military.pdf.

[51]   Election Commission of Pakistan, *Constituency wise detailed Result (1988 - 1997), op.cit.*

[52]   Election Commission of Pakistan, *General Elections 2002 Report,* vol. 1 (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, 2004), https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/ge2002-v1.pdf.

constituency.[53] JUI-F's Akram Khan Durrani was elected as chief minister.[54]

There are different views about MMA's phenomenal win in the elections, particularly in NWFP. Akbar S. Zaidi believes that the major factor that led to MMA's victory in NWFP and Balochistan was the US attack on Taliban Government in Afghanistan. According to him, without the propagation of anti-US sentiments, the MMA would not have won even 20% of the seats that it actually won. Zaidi further argues that the absence of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif from the political scene also benefited MMA.[55]

MMA also termed the election as a contest between agents of the US and those upholding Islamic values and urged the voters to vote for it so that it may bring Pakistan out of US influence. MMA's promise to introduce Islamic laws in the country also helped it secure votes, especially among the Pashtuns.[56] Some observers believe that though MMA used religious card, the ethnic factor was far more important for MMA's victory than religious factor. The fact that Pashtuns were the major sufferers of the US war in Afghanistan and the impression that the war was specifically against the Pashtuns incited anger among Pashtuns and thus they voted for MMA, which had made anti-US rhetoric a part of its election campaign. Resultantly, it was the Pashtun areas from where MMA won most of its seats. ANP's support for the ouster of Taliban regime in Afghanistan also alienated the Pashtun voters, which indirectly benefited the MMA. However, MMA attributed its success to the vanishing support for the mainstream political parties. It also claimed that one factor behind its success was the fact that unlike other parties, religious parties run welfare programs in social, educational, and health sectors.[57]

The fact that MMA enjoyed some patronage from the Musharraf Government also cannot be ignored. Many cases against MMA leaders and workers were withdrawn immediately before the 2002 elections. For example, Balochistan Government's law ministry issued official letters to prosecutors of four anti-terrorism courts directing them to put on hold the litigation till scrutiny of nomination papers. This provided relief to

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[53]   Zafar Afaq Ansari and Abdul Rashid Moten, *op.cit.*

[54]   'Akram Durrani Elected NWFP Chief Minister', *Dawn*, 30 November 2002, https://www.dawn.com/news/69203.

[55]   S. Akbar Zaidi, 'Pakistan Elections: Continuity Rather Than Change', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37:44-45 (2002).

[56]   Kamran Aziz Khan, *op.cit.*, 98.

[57]   International Crisis Group, Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military, *op.cit.*, 14-17.

several MMA leaders including JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Hafiz Husain Ahmad.[58] The anti-Musharraf parties faced serious constraints in their electoral campaigns while few parties, including MMA were allowed to run their electoral campaigns without much hindrance. For instance, MMA was allowed to hold public meetings in Rawalpindi even before the removal of ban on such gatherings while PPP and PML-N were denied permission for doing so.[59]

MMA also received more time on official television as compared to other opposition parties. The preliminary report of the European Union Election Observation Mission observed that a total of 6 hours and 20 minutes were allocated to election related news on PTV-1 between August 15 and October 9. Of the total allocated time, PML-Q got 44 minutes, MMA 36 minutes, PPP 29 minutes, Grand National Alliance (GNA) 13 minutes, PML-N 13 minutes, PTI 10 minutes and MQM 8 minutes.[60]

There is also a school of thought which believes that MMA's success was the result of manipulation by ISI and the military regime to use it as a bargaining chip in dealings with the US.[61] On the other hand, some believe that ISI, having understood with the US, played a role in its success. This school of thought argues that as MMA, in addition to its focus on Sharia, Jihad, and anti-Americanism, also called for educational and health facilities and pro-poor policies like other political parties, so, the thinking which prevailed in Islamabad and ultimately Washington was that after its agreement with General Musharraf on constitutional and foreign policy issues, formation of MMA government in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the best strategy to co-opt the Islamic forces. The logic behind this thinking, it is argued, was that Islamic elements 'in' were better than Islamic elements 'out' as the latter option contained the risk of anti-government protests.[62]

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[58]   Mohammad Waseem and Mariam Mufti, 'Religion, Politics, and Governance in Pakistan,' Working Paper No. 27 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2009), 40.

[59]   International Crisis Group, *The Mullahs and the Military*, *op.cit.*, 16.

[60]   Nasir Iqbal, 'Observers Term Polls Seriously Flawed', *Dawn*, 13 October 2002, https://www.dawn.com/news/61549.

[61]   Kamran Aziz Khan, *op.cit.*, 102.

[62]   M. Waseem and Mariam Mufti, *op.cit.*, 15.

Ousting of Pervez Musharraf and Return of Civilian Rule: The 2008 General Elections

15 November 2007, was a historic day in Pakistan's history as it was for the first time that an elected assembly completed its constitutionally mandated five years term. Thus, fresh elections to the National Assembly and provincial assemblies were held in 2008. The election date was changed several times and finally the elections were held on 18 February 2008.[63]

The 2008 elections were held in a very volatile law and order situation as the country was in the grip of militancy. In the four months period starting from 18 October 2007 when Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan to 18 February 2008, when the elections were held, the country experienced twenty-five suicide attacks claiming hundreds of lives including that of Benazir Bhutto herself.[64] In addition to law and order situation, the elections were preceded by some serious political crises like imposition of emergency, Musharraf's attempt to dismiss the then Chief Justice Iftekhar Muhammad Chaudhary and other judges of higher judiciary, legal questions over Musharraf's status as president, and the return of two former prime ministers to the country and politics.[65]

Before the 2008 general elections, opposition parties including PML-N, PTI, PKMAP, ANP, JUI-F, and JI launched All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) to oust Musharraf. APDM first led a campaign for the boycott of the elections. However, the majority of its members participated in the elections.[66]

Though Musharraf was not contesting the election, the election results were viewed as a referendum on his rule[67] and it was shortly after these elections that he was forced to resign to avoid impeachment by the parliament[68] The apparent absence of large-scale rigging on the polling day enabled opposition political parties to comprehensively defeat Musharraf's political allies.[69]

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[63] K. Alan Kronstadt, *Pakistan's 2008 Elections: Results and Implications for U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress RL34449 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 4.

[64] Tahir Mehdi, 'An Overview of 2008 General Elections', *Dawn*, April 16, 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/799014.

[65] K. Alan Kronstadt, *op.cit.*, 2.

[66] Iffat Hamayoun Khan, 'Electoral Malpractices in Pakistan: A Case Study of the General Elections 2008', *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, 31:2 (2010), 174.

[67] K. Alan Kronstadt, *op.cit.*, 4.

[68] Tahir Mehdi, 'An overview of 2008…', *op.cit.*

[69] K. Alan Kronstadt, *op.cit.*

In NWFP, the ANP emerged with the highest number of seats at both national and provincial levels. In NWFP Assembly, ANP won 31 seats, PPP 17, PML-N 6, MMA 10, PPP-Sherpao[70] 6, and PML 4. Twenty-two seats were won by independents while elections on three seats were postponed due to the death of one of the contesting candidates from these constituencies. In National Assembly elections, ANP won 10 seats, PPP 9, PML-N 4, MMA 4, APML 3, PML-Q 2, QWP 1, and independents 2.[71] It may be noted that in its election campaign, ANP clearly stated that it will fight against the militant discourse in the province and the country.[72]

As ANP emerged the single largest party in NWFP Assembly, so it formed coalition government with PPP. It was for the first time since 1986 when ANP government was formed that it got the slot of chief minister. It also got 12 out of 21 ministries in the provincial cabinet.[73] Though many believe that the 2008 elections were one of the most free and fair, but on many polling stations, turnout was more than the registered votes. In NWFP, there were seven National Assembly constituencies where one or more polling stations had more turnout than the total number of registered voters.[74]

Emergence of a New Political Force: The 2013 General Elections

The 2013 elections were another historic development in Pakistan's political history as it was for the first time that a civilian government (without military tutelage) completed its term followed by smooth transition of power to another civilian government.[75] Another historical aspect of these elections was that it was for the first time that Political Parties Order was extended to the then FATA and thus political parties were able to award tickets to candidates in former FATA.[76]

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[70] In 2012, its name was changed to Qaumi Watan Party (QWP).

[71] Election Commission of Pakistan, *General Elections 2008 Report*, vol. 2 (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, 2008), https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/ge2008-2.pdf.

[72] Khadim Hussain, *Political Cost the ANP Paid in Its Fight against Extremists* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2013), 1.

[73] K. Alan Kronstadt, *op.cit.*, 6.

[74] Iffat Hamayoun Khan, *op.cit.*, 177-78.

[75] Yunas Samad, 'Elections and Democratic Transition in Pakistan: One Step Forward and Two Steps Backwards', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 55:4 (2017): 509, https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2017.1323399.

[76] Commonwealth Observer Mission, *Pakistan General Elections*, 11 May 2013 (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013), 5, https://doi.org/10.14217/9781848591660-en.

The environment surrounding the 2013 elections was marred by use of violence by extremists as 128 terrorist attacks took place in 40 days preceding the elections. Responsibility for most of these attacks was claimed by the Taliban who had announced the PPP, MQM, and ANP as their legitimate targets.[77] Taliban targeted candidates of secular parties like PPP and ANP and their supporters while rightwing and Islamist parties enjoyed enough freedom to hold traditional public rallies. Thus, some political parties were holding big rallies while leaders of other parties would secretly rush from one corner meeting to another.[78] Even many journalists refused to interview them because of potential threat. The main victim of Taliban's campaign was ANP.

According to a report of Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), between January 1 and May 15, ANP faced the highest number of attacks (37) followed by PPP and MQM with 12 each. Other parties also faced terrorist attacks but not as frequently as ANP.[79] New York Times, some 20 days before the elections, reported that '[e]electioneering has taken a dark twist in northwest Pakistan, where a concerted campaign of Taliban attacks against the main secular party is violently reshaping the democratic landscape before parliamentary elections scheduled for 11 May'.[80] BBC also reported this issue and observed that ANP was affected the most by militants' attacks.[81]

In his article published in daily *Dawn* on 10 May 2013, Khadim Hussain wrote that '[t]he ANP seemed to be singled out by the TTP in Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, being attacked almost on a daily basis.' He further wrote that most of the attacks on ANP occurred in areas where it was supposed to get majority or considerable votes[82]

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[77]   Tahir Mehdi, 'Election 2013: Between Hope and Despair', *Dawn*, 27 June 2018, https://www.dawn.com/news/1416389.

[78]   Jon Boone, 'Pakistan's Campaign Trail: Politicians Use Stealth to Outwit Taliban Threats', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/28/pakistan-politicians-defy-taliban-threat.

[79]   Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, *Elections 2013: Violence against Political Parties, Candidates and Voters* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2013).

[80]   Declan Walsh, 'Taliban Attacks in Northwest Pakistan Are Reshaping Ballot', *New York Times*, 21 April 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/world/asia/pakistani-taliban-violently-reshape-the-ballot.html.

[81]   Khadim Hussain, 'Political Cost the ANP Paid..' *op.cit*., 4.

[82]   Khadim Hussain, 'A Blood-Soaked Discourse,' *Dawn*, 11 May 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/1010654.

The local leaders of ANP in Peshawar, Swabi, Swat, and Charsadda districts, the stronghold of ANP, would almost on a daily basis receive threatening letters during the three months preceding elections. Some 30 polling agents in these districts revealed that on Election Day, they received letters in the morning warning them of attacks on polling stations where ANP was supposed to win. Such tactics had serious consequences for ANP as the top leadership was already under 'virtual house arrest' due to security threats. Law enforcement agencies would also force ANP's local leadership not to take out rallies and hold corner meetings due to security reasons.[83]

Though threat and use of violence did put some parties at disadvantage (especially ANP), still the voters took to polling stations more than ever before, which resulted in the highest turnout rate in the province after 1970 elections. In the 2013 elections, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa voters lived up to their reputation of voting a party into power other than they voted for in the previous elections. Thus, they turned away from ANP and voted for PTI which emerged as the largest party in provincial assembly.[84] Out of 99 general seats, PTI won 35, JUI-F 13, PML-N 12, QWP 7, JI 7, ANP 4, PPP 3, while 18 seats were won by other smaller parties and independents.[85] In the National Assembly too PTI emerged as the most successful party with 17 out of 35 general seats from the province.[86] PTI, being the largest single party in the province, formed a coalition government with JI, QWP, Awami Jamhoori Ittehad Pakistan, and some independents.[87]

Religious parties, to some extent, recovered from the crushing defeat of 2008 and won a handsome number of seats. However, ANP received its worst ever results in the 2013 elections as it won only 4 provincial assembly and 1 National Assembly seat. In addition to the incumbency and militancy factors, Khadim Hussain tries to link this poor performance with some other factors. He writes that it seems that the ANP discourse was not well received by some within the civil and

[83]   Khadim Hussain, 'Political Cost the ANP Paid…', *op.cit*., 5.
[84]   Tahir Mehdi, 'Election 2013…', *op.cit.*
[85]   National Democratic Institute and Asian Network for Free Elections, *2013 National and Provincial Assembly Elections in Pakistan* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, 2013), 36, https://www.ndi.org.
[86]   Colin Cookman and Andrew Wilder, 'Pakistan's Momentous Elections: Winners, Losers, and What It All Means', *Foreign Policy*, 15 May 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/15/pakistans-momentous-elections-winners-losers-and-what-it-all-means/.
[87]   National Democratic Institute and Asian Network for Free Elections, *op.cit.*, 35.

military establishment because of the fear that ANP's indigenous socio-cultural narrative against religious bigotry might lead to a secular Pakistan and that its dominance in the province might lead to greater regional autonomy. He argues that Pakistan's desire for a negotiated settlement with Taliban in Afghanistan in order to have long term influence also necessitated favorable political conditions in Pakistan (to empower parties like JI and PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) even if it meant deprivation of the voters of genuine representation. Thus, the narrative supported by ANP had to be kept away from political power in the province.[88] Hussain further claims that the election results in 2013 were consequences ANP faced for its efforts to mainstream FATA, which would have compelled Pakistan to revisit its policy toward Afghanistan, and counter militants' narrative. Thus, he contends, ANP was targeted with a deliberate media campaign and attacks by militants to keep it away from the electoral campaign. He writes:

> After scanning large media outlets a few months before the elections, one can easily conclude that media was used in the shape of talk shows, propagation of pre-poll surveys and columns in print media to widely disseminate the narrative of 'corruption', 'pro-Americanism' and, bad governance against the ANP. With the exceptions of a few columnists and anchor-persons, most of the columns in print media and most of the anchor persons in electronic media continuously depicted the ANP to be a loser in the elections. The media manipulators knew quite well that workers, voters and sympathizers of the ANP could be de-motivated effectively through the use of this tool. Consistent use of social media was also profusely carried out to discredit the leadership by dubbing them 'corrupt,' 'coward' and 'agents.'[89]

Though ANP linked its defeat with an organized campaign against it, many believe that its defeat was the result of its incumbency factor and widespread allegations of favoritism, nepotism, and corruption.

Path Dependence in KP: The 2018 General Elections
The 2018 elections produced unusual results in the province as it was for the first time since 1951 that a single party won enough seats to form government in the province on its own. PTI emerged as the single largest party winning 65 out of the 96 provincial assembly seats[90]. MMA won

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88 Khadim Hussain, 'Political Cost the ANP Paid…', *op.cit*., 2.
89 *Ibid*., 4.
90 Elections were delayed on two seats due to the death of one of candidates on those two seats while result of one constituency was withheld by ECP.

10 seats, ANP 7, PPP and PML-N 4 seats each, while 6 seats were won by independent candidates. In National Assembly elections, PTI won 30, MMA 4, PML-N 3, and ANP 1 while one seat was won by an independent candidate.[91] Following the elections, PTI formed government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Mehmood Khan as chief minister.

Like 1951 elections, the 2018 elections are considered to be among the most manipulated ones in Pakistan's history. The results were rejected by all parties except PTI. On August 8, thousands of workers and leaders of PPP, PML-N, ANP, MMA, QWP, and some other political parties staged a protest in front of Election Commission of Pakistan against alleged rigging.[92]

An interesting aspect of these elections was that parties like MMA, ANP, and PPP included in their manifestoes some issues that were first raised by Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) or Pashtun Protection Movement. ANP also specifically mentioned in its manifesto the issue of security checkpoints and treatment of people at these checkpoints and removal of landmines from erstwhile FATA.[93] These were the issues that were first raised by PTM. Many believe that ANP made references to check points and landmines in its manifesto to attract voters and prevent PTM from encroaching upon its support base as PTM's demands including these two issues made it much popular. In the run up to elections, ANP even issued directives to its workers not to attend PTM's gatherings as PTM leaders would publicly criticize the army while ANP did not want to displease the army, which many believe to be a major factor in determining election results.

Similarly, MMA raised issues like recovery of missing persons and an end to state's atrocities and illegal arrests.[94] MMA President Maulana Fazlur Rehman, while unveiling MMA's manifesto, even questioned ISPR's claims that peace has returned to the erstwhile FATA.

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[91]   Election Commission of Pakistan, *Detailed Gazette Notification of Returned Candidates of General Elections-2018* (KPK) (Islamabad: Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018), https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/Provincial%20KPK1.pdf.

[92]   Asad Hashim, 'Pakistan Opposition Parties Protest Election Results,' *Al Jazeera*, 8 August 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/8/8/pakistan-opposition-parties-protest-election-results.

[93]   Awami National Party (ANP), *Elections Manifesto 2018*, 5, https://www.af.org.pk/images/election/manifesto/ANP_%20Manifesto%20Eng.pdf.

[94]   Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, *MMA Manifesto 2018*, 11, https://rtepakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MMA_Manshoor_General_Election_2018.pdf.

He questioned why explosions occur in Waziristan if peace had really been established in the area.[95] MMA also included in its manifesto the issues of provincial autonomy and royalty for provinces from resources extracted from their soil---issues mainly concerning KP and Balochistan.[96] PPP also in its manifesto demanded an end to extra judicial killings and enforced disappearances. It further pledged to resolve the issues of maltreatment at check posts and landmines in the tribal areas.[97]

Conclusion

A look at the electoral history of KP province (1988 to 2018) reveals that it has been in a state of frequent ideological and structural flux. The province is uniquely vulnerable to both domestic governance and regional geopolitical shocks. During the last thirty year, the provincial political configuration transitioned to a consolidated, albeit contested, single-party dominance – the PTI. The transition and consolidation took from an era of extreme volatility, bipolarity and constant institutional interventions. Since restoration of democracy in 1988 and in the 1990s, KP remained a battleground for the power struggle between the mainstream PPP, PMPL-N and electoral alliances IJI. These coalitions often proved fragile due to frequent use of Article 58(2) b resulting into dismissing the elected governments. This duration can be easily characterized as the era when political mandates were often dictated by center-province power rivalries rather than local performance issues. In 2002, a dramatic shift occurred when Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) rose to power. The MMA capitalized on anti-Americanism in the backdrop of the fallout of September 11, underscored the electorate's ability to mobilize against external pressures, and mark the climax of religious-political influence in the province. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the most significant transformation in KP occurred in the post-2008 period. The KP province, the erstwhile FATA experienced unprecedented phases of militancy and bloodshed. During this turmoil, the more secular-leaning parties like the ANP, incurred heavy price in blood for their ideological positioning. This violent trajectory further

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[95]   Kalbe Ali, 'MMA Unveils 12-Point Election Manifesto', *Dawn*, 6 June 2018, https://www.dawn.com/news/1412304.

[96]   Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, 'MMA Manifesto 2018', *op.cit*., 3.

[97]   Pakistan Peoples Party, Manifesto 2018: BB Ka Waada Nibhana Hai, Pakistan Bachana Hai (Islamabad: Pakistan Peoples Party, 2018), 47, https://www.pppp.org.pk/manifestos/PPP%20MANIFESTO%202018%20-%20ENGLISH.pdf.

shrank the outreach of secular forces like ANP and paved the way for the subsequent rise of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in 2013. Since then, the PTI secured back-to-back electoral victories and thus signaled a paradigm shift. This shift also marked the beginning of a new era in KP electorate: the electorate in the KP province is no more a path dependent, long known for its 'anti-incumbency' tradition. The politics of 'Tabdeeli' (change) and institutional reform replaced the ethnonationalist street, the mainstream political and even religio-political narratives. The politics of change, however, always remained under the shadow of the 'establishment'. Ultimately, the electoral journey of KP from 1988 to 2018 highlights a maturing democracy that has navigated the complexities of Pashtun nationalism, religious conservatism, and populist reformism. While security challenges and institutional interference continue to shadow the democratic process, the province has emerged as a trendsetter in Pakistani politics, proving that its voters are among the most politically conscious and unpredictable in the federation. The 2018 elections, while controversial, marked a milestone where a single party finally broke the cycle of rotating power, setting the stage for a new era of provincial governance.