

The cost of politics in **Pakistan**

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List of acronyms

ECP	Electoral Commission of Pakistan
FGD	Focus group discussion
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami
KII	Key informant interview
MNA	Member of National Assembly
MQM	Muttahida Qaumi Movement
PKR	Pakistani rupee
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz
PPF	Political parties fund
PPP	Pakistan People’s Party
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
SOEs	State owned enterprises

Introduction

Money is a defining feature of the political landscape in Pakistan. There is an implicit understanding amongst politicians and the public alike that a life in politics is only possible for those who have considerable means, and the ability to generate funds as and when needed.

Electoral campaigns require significant expenditure, and almost all political parties expect candidates to fund these themselves. Given the significant costs involved, those who aspire to political office, or who simply want a chance to represent their community, can only do so if they are independently wealthy; come from wealthy families who are willing to make the investment in electoral politics; or manage to secure the financial support of an influential group of persons.

The need for substantial finances has distorted the electoral landscape in Pakistan and promoted a culture of personality cults rather than discussions on party manifestoes or policy positions. This goes beyond election campaigns and shapes the conduct of politics in parliament given that elected representatives are under pressure to either pay back supporters who have helped finance their political journey, or to recoup their initial outlay during their time in office they focus as much on this as policy formulation.

However, the 2024 general elections marked a significant departure from the established pattern in many constituencies across the country. 117 seats, 38% of the total, were won by candidates who had not previously served as parliamentarians.¹ This outcome has largely been attributed to a popular movement led by Imran Khan and his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). But it remains to be seen whether this can be sustained and change the way politics work long-term, or whether it was a one-off reaction to a set of specific circumstances.

Methodology

This study aims to analyse the financial burdens faced by political candidates, ranging from new entrants to the established political leaders, using the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's 'cost of politics' methodology. This approach covers the entire electoral cycle, encompassing the decision to run for office, the candidacy process, campaign expenditures, and the expenses incurred after being elected to parliament. To gather the data required both secondary research and primary data collection were undertaken.

A comprehensive literature review on the cost of politics in Pakistan, covering relevant constitutional provisions, laws, newspaper articles, research papers, and other relevant materials was undertaken. This review provided a strong foundation for the primary research, by providing a better understanding of the dynamics surrounding the cost of politics issue in Pakistan.

For the primary data collection a total of four focus group discussions (FGDs) were held. Three of these were held with voters: one in a rural area, another in an urban area, and one with female voters. The fourth FGD was organised to gather the perspectives of media and civil society

representatives. In addition to the FGDs, 22 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with elected representatives from all three mainstream parties, as well as regional and religious parties, members of civil society, former government officials, and journalists. While the primary focus was on elected representatives, the inclusion of media professionals, experts, civil society members, and former government officials significantly enriched the findings and analysis, by ensuring a broad and diverse set of perspective on the issue were captured.

Pakistan's political, economic and demographic landscape

Pakistan has had a chequered history, with long periods of political upheaval, interspersed with short periods of stability. Despite achieving independence in 1947 the country's first constitution was only promulgated in March 1956.² But despite this, Pakistan remained politically unstable, with political parties unable to reach a compromise on power sharing and representation.

The country has experienced regular military rule. The first period beginning in 1958 and ending in 1972; that was followed by a period of martial law from 1977 to 1985 which was replaced by a military led government from 1985 to 1988; and another military led government was in control from 1999 to 2008. Even during periods of civilian rule, the military has remained a potent force. Its power manifests through its role in creating political groups, making or breaking alliances across parties, or simply in ensuring that policy implementation does not negatively impact its interests.

Although two civilian governments have completed their terms since 2008 - from 2008 to 2013, and then from 2013 to 2018 - both had to change prime ministers mid-term at the behest of the military. Whilst the government of PTI, which came to power in 2018 faced a no-confidence vote in April 2022 and was de-seated after a bitter confrontation, that the military was accused of being behind.³ Following this removal Khan and his party then found themselves the victim of a military led nationwide political crackdown.⁴

In run up to the 2024 general elections, most of the key leaders of PTI were either forced to leave the party or went into hiding. The crackdown also extended to the lower tiers of the party, with even local workers being arrested, charged or simply held in jail for extended periods. The party was prohibited from holding rallies or even corner meetings, and its ticket holders were forced into hiding.

One of the biggest blows to the party came when the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) revoked its electoral symbol, a decision later upheld by the Supreme Court.⁵ In Pakistan, where literacy rates are low, the electoral symbol enables many voters to identify a party's candidate and cast their vote. As a result, all PTI ticket holders were effectively treated as independent candidates and were assigned a number of random symbols for electoral purposes.

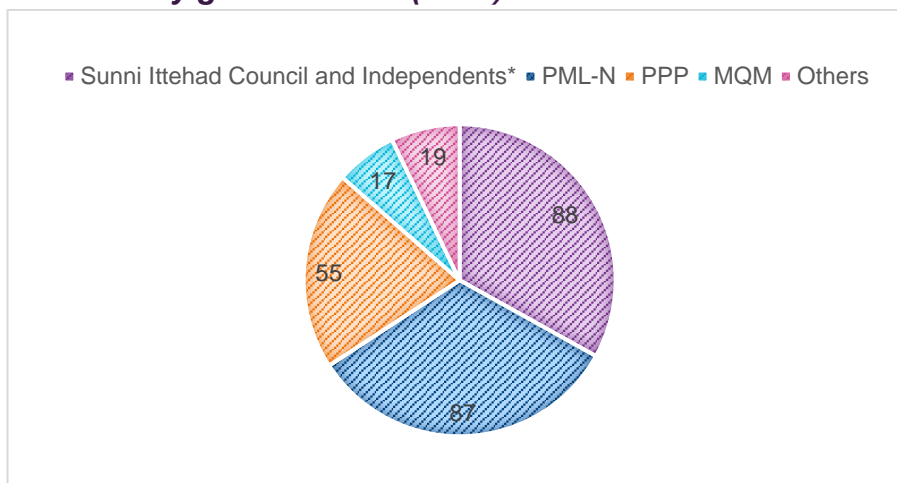
Whilst the 2024 general elections were marred by allegations of fraud⁶ they managed to break several established electoral patterns across the country, particularly in Punjab, which accounts for 53% of the nation's total population.⁷ Candidates from well-established political dynasties, some of

whom had never lost an election, were defeated by newcomers in what was perceived to be a populist wave sweeping the nation. Some of these new candidates were announced just days before the election, and had spent neither time nor money in their constituencies, yet still managed to secure victory.

One of the key factors attributed to this success was the highly effective use of social media to engage voters and encourage support for the chosen candidates.⁸ Imran Khan’s Facebook Messenger was modified so that when someone messaged him with their National or Provincial Assembly constituency number, they would receive an automatic reply mentioning the name of their supported candidate and the symbol allocated to them. WhatsApp groups were created with the same feature, and separate broadcast groups were set up for each constituency to keep voters updated. In addition to using these existing social media platforms, new applications such as ‘PTI Raabta’⁹, developed by the party, were used to help voters identify the party’s candidate and the symbol allocated to them, effectively nullifying the impact of the ECP’s decision.

PTI was able to secure a large number of seats in the National Assembly and, was potentially on track to form both the national, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governments. Although tabulation was abruptly halted after polls closed, with allegations that the results were then altered to prevent PTI from being in a position to form the government, it still emerged as one of the largest parties in the legislature even though it lacked the numbers to form a government. This was done by the forging of a coalition between the Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz Group (PML-N) and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), with further support provided by several smaller parties.

Figure 1: National Assembly general seats (2024)



* PTI candidates contested the election as independent candidates. Once in parliament, they joined the Sunni Ittehad Alliance. This was done to enable them to nominate candidates for reserved seats, something which only parties elected to parliament can do.

Electoral financing

The ECP regulates electoral expenditure through the Election Act of 2017, which was updated in August 2023. The amended Act clarifies that all expenses from the date of filing of nomination papers, to the date of issue of the final consolidated result, will be considered as election expenses. The 2017 Act was clear that the electoral expenses of a candidate include expenses

incurred by the candidate themselves, but also expenditure by a political party, or by other person(s), for the candidate's campaign.¹⁰ But this provision has been rendered all but ineffective by the inclusion of Section 132(5) in the amended version. It states that, if any person incurs election expenditure for the candidate, but does not take his permission, or the candidate does not know of the source of the expenditure, then the candidate will not be held liable for this funding. In effect, if a candidate simply declares that they did not know who funded certain campaign activities, or states that they did not explicitly give permission for them, the expenditure will not count towards the total amount spent. This gives leeway to candidates to go well beyond the formal spending limits laid out in the law.

When the Act was first tabled seven years ago, expenses were capped at 4 million Pakistani rupee's (PKR) or US\$14,286¹¹ for National Assembly candidates, and PKR 2 million for candidates of the four provincial assemblies. The limit was revised in August 2023 to PKR 10 million and PKR 4 million respectively to more accurately reflect the realities of electoral campaigning.¹² As per section 133 of the Election Act, candidates are supposed to open a dedicated bank account to handle election expenses and maintain a register of receipts. Candidates are also supposed to submit returns of election expenses within 30 days of notification of a returned candidate.

However, the enforcement of electoral finance provisions is practically non-existent. Section 183 states that the penalty for illegal practice is specified at a prison term of up to two years and/or a fine of PKR 100,000. However, no candidate has ever been charged with violating election expenditure stipulations requirements and with the inclusion of Section 132(5), it has become almost impossible to prove excessive electoral expenditure, meaning that this pattern is likely to continue.

Socio-economic conditions

To better understand the cost of politics in Pakistan, it is imperative to understand the country's socio-economic conditions and how these shape people's expectations from their elected representatives. Pakistan's economy has largely struggled to keep pace with its South Asian peers since the late 1990s. With a fast increasing population, limited resources, and persistent security challenges since the early 1980s, the country has been unable to achieve economic stability. In October 2024 it entered into its 24th macroeconomic adjustment program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under this programme, Pakistan will be required to meet a series of stringent conditions over the next three years to improve its macroeconomic indicators. Previous IMF conditions, combined with high inflation, the highest in the region over the last three years, have taken a severe toll on economically vulnerable segments of society.

According to the latest multidimensional poverty index, calculated on the basis of 2017-18 household data, 38.3% of the population of Pakistan was poor in multidimensional terms.¹³ This is the highest multidimensional poverty incidence rate in South Asia. 2023 World Bank estimates suggest that 40.5% of people in Pakistan live below the poverty threshold of US\$3.65,¹⁴ with an additional 2.6 million people falling below the poverty line in 2024¹⁵ as a result of macroeconomic volatility. The impact has also been pronounced on middle income and lower-middle-income

groups. In 2024, inflation in Pakistan averaged 23.4%, four times higher than the average across regional comparators Nepal, India and Bangladesh.¹⁶

Demography dynamics

The majority of Pakistan's population resides in rural areas, with 39% classified as urban residents. This rural-urban divide plays a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes, campaign costs, and voter expectations. In rural areas, voting patterns tend to rely more on deference, patronage and the *baradari*¹⁷ (kinship) system, whereas voter in urban areas are less likely to be bound by these constraints. Another important factor to consider is the average size of a constituency. According to the latest census, there are approximately 900,000 people per constituency, with slight variations across different regions.

The same census revealed that 47% of Pakistan's population is below the age of 18, with 79% under 40.¹⁸ These demographics, along with the large number of new voters reaching voting age every year - ECP registered 6.4 million new voters between October 2022 and December 2023, 3.5 million of whom were female¹⁹ - has begun, and will continue, to have a significant impact on the voting patterns in the country with the potential to reshape the political landscape, and challenge established political and societal structures.

Table 1: Pakistan's electoral landscape (2023)

Region	Population (million)	% urban	National Assembly seats	Population per National Assembly seat
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	40.8	15	45	907,913
Islamabad	2.4	46.9	3	787,954
Punjab	127.7	40.7	141	905,595
Sindh	55.7	53.7	61	913,052
Balochistan	14.9	31	16	930,900
Pakistan	241.5	38.8	266	907,893

Source: Data compiled from Free and Fair Elections Network and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

Drivers of the cost of politics

Establishing and maintaining credentials

Candidates intending to participate in elections typically spend years working within their constituencies, which requires both financial and social commitments. When asked, most candidates reported spending between PKR 1-3 million per month in their constituencies. These are ongoing costs that a politician incurs pretty much throughout their political careers. To put this in perspective, the average income in Pakistan is PKR 40,000 per month and the average salary of a legislator, before benefits, is PKR 519,000 per month (**see Annex 1**).

These expenses include running their constituency offices, or other spaces where they can meet people from the area when they are not in office, transport costs, and contributions they are expected to make to various community events, or to help individual constituents. Even after an election, a candidate is expected to invest a significant amount of time and money in their constituency and remain accessible to constituents, either directly or through representatives. They are expected to attend funerals, weddings, sports events, charity functions, and help their constituents with navigating notoriously bureaucratic and complicated government offices, such as the police and land revenue departments.

Another expectation that candidates are expected to meet is the constant demand for job placements within various government departments, especially for lower-level positions; and the development of basic infrastructure, such as roads, drainage systems, and other essential services in local communities. In a fully functional multi-tier system of government, community level infrastructure projects are typically handled by local governments. However, due to ineffective or, in some cases, non-existent local government structures in Pakistan, much of the responsibility for such basic level development work falls on the shoulders of aspiring and incumbent legislators. Finally, political aspirants have to navigate a system of political deference, the *baradari* system, and patronage networks, to improve their chances of getting nominated by their party.

Winning over entrenched and powerful actors

In Pakistan, the *baradari* system plays a significant role in elections, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Under this system, members of a family, tribe, community, or caste vote collectively as a bloc for a favoured candidate or party. Bloc voting allows these groups to secure promises or favours in exchange for their support. *Baradari* decisions are typically strategic and pragmatic, prioritising the selection of a candidate likely to win, and who is willing to safeguard their collective interests. As a result, they normally align with well-established, well-to-do prospective candidates who have a better chance of winning, a barrier that new entrants struggle to overcome.

Garnering the support of powerful local families or individuals is therefore key but it also can be a driver of the cost of politics, with aspirants having to spend time and resources on social events and local charities to try and gain currency with such groups. Most constituencies in Pakistan are politically dominated by families, whose influence stems from a combination of factors such as

financial standing, large landholdings, social status, and the accumulation of political capital. It is even common to see members of the same family contesting for multiple seats within their constituencies, at the provincial, national, and even local level. For example, Yousuf Raza Gillani, a former Prime Minister of Pakistan, and the current Chairman of the Senate, has three sons serving as members of the National Assembly, while his fourth son is the member of the Provincial Assembly in Punjab.

In regions like South Punjab and Sindh, where there are large landholdings and feudal families still hold significant influence, voters often depend on these powerful landlords both financially and for protection. This dependency, coupled with fear of retribution or losing favour, makes it difficult for them to vote against them, or their interests. An interviewee from South Punjab shared that during the 2012 elections, a candidate, suspecting that his *mazaras* (tenants) may not have voted for him, ordered them to vacate the land they had been managing for three generations. Similarly, in areas with strong traditional tribal structures, the hold of tribal leaders, known as *sardars*, is so strong that ordinary individuals cannot even contest elections against them, due to the threat of violence. In industrial cities like Faisalabad, industrialists with the backing of political parties, now also hold significant power and political control over their areas and workers. One interviewee shared an incident in which a factory owner in the city coerced workers to vote for his preferred candidate. He confiscated workers' identity cards, transported them to the polling station, and compelled to vote for the preferred candidate by threatening to terminate the employment of those who refused.²⁰ Therefore candidates seek to do what they can to bring these powerful and influential actors onside.

Additional obstacles for female aspirants

In purely monetary costs, the campaign liabilities faced by women are not very different to those of men. However, in a conservative society like Pakistan, women face many additional issues when they enter into public life. In general, women are largely absent from public spaces in Pakistan, and women in politics have to face all kinds of additional prejudices. They are judged for their appearance, their clothing, the way they interact with their male colleagues, and even their personal relationships. In the past, women leaders have also faced opposition from religious leaders. When Benazir Bhutto became the first woman Prime Minister of a Muslim country in 1988, a faction of clergy opposed her elevation to the office on the grounds that women should not be allowed to lead a Muslim nation. In some parts of Pakistan, albeit in just a few remote constituencies, local leaders and the clergy joined hands against women candidates participating in the 2024 elections.

Securing the party's endorsement

Candidates who are contesting under a party ticket pay a fee to the party. In the 2024 elections, the candidates for the two main political parties, PTI and PML-N were each asked to pay PKR 200,000 as fee into party coffers when applying for the National Assembly ticket.²¹ However informal demands are much higher, particularly for new entrants.

One well-established property developer in Islamabad is reported to have paid PKR 500 million in cash and in kind, to the party's leadership in order to secure a ticket for himself.²² The interviewees for this research, some of whom were from the same party, not only confirmed it but also referred to it as the “cost of accelerated entry into politics”. They also explained that the property developer was in a bit of a bind, as his housing project was declared illegal by the authorities, and he had numerous criminal cases registered against him related to fraud, land grabbing, and even murder. He wanted to buy his way into political circles, and was using his money to secure political support to protect both his business and himself.

Registration costs

In Pakistan, any citizen above the age of 25 can run for elections by obtaining a proposer and a seconder from their respective constituency. According to the Election Commission Act of 2017, Sections 60 and 61, candidates are required to complete a nomination form, submit an undertaking to open a separate bank account for election expenses, provide a copy of their national identity card and provide detailed information about their assets and finances, including those of their dependents.

Candidates are required to deposit a sum of PKR 30,000 for a National Assembly seat and PKR 20,000 for a Provincial Assembly seat at the time of submission of documents to the returning officer. These costs alone may not seem high, but legal costs immediately start piling up as soon as the nomination papers are submitted. Candidates are required to appear before the returning officer, who is normally a judicial officer, and address any questions or concerns they may have regarding the nomination papers. At this stage, opponents can also file objections to the nomination, which are then reviewed and decided upon and which all come with cost implications.

Meeting voters expectations

Due to continuous disruptions to the democratic process, combined with weak governance and political structures, the perception of power becomes a significant factor in people's voting decisions. Voters tend to prefer candidates who are visibly powerful, which means those who can flaunt status symbols like big cars, security details, large houses, and who have the ability to spend lavishly. Given service delivery, justice, and governance mechanisms are weak, voters believe that a politician with significant influence and resources is better equipped to assist them in their personal and community affairs. Demonstrating this ability during the pre-election period is therefore critical.

This reflects a reality where voters are typically not concerned with policy or broader strategic issues affecting their lives. Instead, they are more focused on extracting tangible benefits from political aspirants, whose ability to deliver on this front is a key factor in determining voter support. Without substantial financial resources and influence within key areas of government, new entrants' chances of making significant inroads are slim. In a non-election period, fuel expenses on car alone

can range from US\$700-1,000,²³ per month depending on factors such as the constituency's location and the candidate's place of residence.

Repelling attacks by opponents

Potential candidates for electoral office also have to ensure that they have finances in place to preempt attempts by rivals to involve them in police cases or other legal proceedings. Established political elites regularly call on the punitive powers of the police in their constituencies, to limit possible opponents. It is widely understood that once a person enters politics, they will be the subject of numerous police investigations, many of which have no legal basis. Nonetheless, politicians end up spending significant resources and time managing these cases throughout their careers. Of the politicians interviewed, every one of them had either previously faced, or is currently facing, a criminal case.

In addition to police cases, the local administration is often used by the incumbent to undermine political opponents with actions targeting a prospective politician's businesses and financial interests also commonplace. One interviewee, who operated a private school, mentioned that his school was sealed off by the education department when he announced his plans to contest. Another reported how his bank withdrew a credit facility of PKR 1 billion for his business, after he became politically engaged, while some suppliers and vendors were pressured into refusing to work with him.

Campaigning and election day outlays

According to Article 224 of the constitution, elections have to be held within a period of sixty days from when the National Assembly is due to complete its five year term. This can be extended to 90 days if the assembly is dissolved before the completion of its term. This 60 or 90 day period is one of the most cost intensive periods in the entire election cycle.

Campaign costs

Candidates reported that in the 2024 elections, on average, they spent between PKR 70-100 million, or US\$250,000-360,000,²⁴ during the campaign period: more than seven times the legal limit. One candidate explained that given the size and geographical spread of constituencies, "it is impossible to keep campaign spending within the prescribed limits." Some interviewees mentioned that the transport expenses alone during the election period often exceed the legal spending cap.

In addition to the candidate's main office in the constituency, multiple election offices are typically set up throughout the constituency during the campaign period. These offices serve as bases for the candidate's activities in specific areas, for organising political events, corner meetings, and maintaining a visible presence. Prominent, visible and well-manned election offices with a significant presence of supporters create the impression that the candidate is well-positioned in the elections, which is perceived to help sway undecided voters. In financing their day-to-day operations, candidates reported spending between PKR 7-8 million on running these offices during the campaign period, with food and refreshments being the largest expenditure item.

Another major expense during the election campaign is the printing of posters, banners, stickers, pamphlets, voter slips, and other promotional materials. Candidates estimated that, collectively, they and their supporters spend between PKR 5-9 million on printing materials during their election campaign.²⁵ But when our research team gathered a few quotations from vendors, these estimates were viewed as conservative. Interviewees mentioned that their supporters and sponsors typically do share some of the financial burden of printed materials, but most of it is still managed by the candidate from his own resources. Under the law, these expenses should technically be included in the candidate's total election expenditure. However, the loophole in Section 132(5) of the Election Act 2017 enables candidates to avoid reporting them.

Digital campaigns

With a young population and improved internet connectivity, social media has assumed a central role in shaping Pakistan's political landscape and narrative. A large number of PTI candidates, who were in hiding, did not spend a single day in their constituency during the 2024 campaign period, and also did not spend much money on their election campaign, but were still able to win their seats by reaching out to their supporters and voters solely through social media applications.

This suggests that the effective use of social media can significantly reduce costs by lowering traditional expenses such as banners, posters, corner meetings, and rallies in a constituency. While personal and face-to-face interactions will always remain important, some aspects of a political campaign can easily be managed by modern tools at a fraction of the cost.

All candidates acknowledged the importance of this new medium and were trying to keep pace with it as well. Some were of the view that, going forward, expenditures on conventional campaigning methods, such as newspaper and television adverts, printing posters, and banners, would become obsolete. Almost all the interviewees confirmed that they had a social media team managing their accounts. Additionally, they also mentioned that their parties were now also making substantial investments in maintaining social media teams.

Finally, there is a universal expectation that during the election period, candidates will be responsible for managing all party-related campaign-related expenses in their constituencies. If the party leadership decides to hold meetings or political gatherings in their areas, the local candidates are expected to cover these costs. It was reported in several interviews that even a mid-sized rally can cost PKR 20-30 million, which covers printing of banners, transportation, food, sound systems, and other miscellaneous items.

Election day expenditure

An average of 340 polling stations were set up in each National Assembly constituency in 2024.²⁶ Managing such a large number of polling stations which includes deputing polling agents, setting

up polling camps outside each station, and arranging food and transport for campaign workers makes election day a very expensive undertaking for candidates. Of the total expenditure, an estimated 60-70% is spent on election day itself.

Candidates explained that one of the biggest expenses is arranging transportation to ferry voters to polling stations. On average, each candidate arranges two cars per polling station.²⁷ Some of these vehicles are provided by supporters, while others are rented for the day. If the cost of two cars per polling station is estimated at approximately PKR 30,000, a candidate end up spending around PKR 10.2 million for all the polling stations in a constituency on transportation alone.

Overall, candidates estimated that the average expenditure per polling station, which includes transport, along with food and drinks and security arrangements, ranges from PKR 150,000-200,000. Given the average of 340 polling stations in a constituency, this adds up to as much as PKR 50 million; meaning that polling day expense can be as much as five times above the ECP's spending limit of PKR 10 million for the entire campaign of a prospective member of the National Assembly (MNA).

Post-election and in-office costs

Lengthy legal battles

In some cases, candidates immediately face legal challenges to their victory. Sections 139 and 140 of the Election Act, 2017 allow for the filing of an election petition before an election tribunal, which are special High Court tribunals, in case of a dispute.²⁸ By law, these tribunals are required to decide on these petitions within 180 days, but normally the process is slow, and defendants become entangled in numerous legal complications. The legal fees for these tribunals themselves represent a significant financial burden on the candidates, and if the cases end up in the Supreme Court, the costs escalate even further. Moreover, decisions on these petitions can take years, lasting longer than the term of the assembly itself, although most are eventually declared infructuous, and dismissed. In 2024 a total of 377 petitions were filed in these tribunals, of which only 40 have been decided as of October 2024.²⁹

Delivering development and charity

After winning the elections one of the key demands of voters is for the initiation of development projects in their constituencies by channelling development funds through various government departments. Most of these are basic infrastructure projects such as small roads or initiatives that address health, sanitation or educational needs. Whilst this should be the responsibility of local government in Pakistan's three-tier government structure, these structures suffer from limited functionality. However, by encroaching on the domain of local governments, a culture of favouritism and patronage is sustained that in turn limits development of systematic governance models across the country.

With a young population, low literacy rates, high levels of poverty, and a general economic downturn, there is also a constant demand and expectation that elected representatives will provide government jobs to their constituents. These expectations are typically for lower grades

jobs in various government departments. However, if the MNA gets into a cabinet position, these expectations increase significantly, and their constituents expect to be accommodated in jobs in various government departments or any of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Experts have argued that this is one reason why some SOEs are over-staffed and are running losses.

Finally, handouts are also still expected from elected officials. Notable political figures in a constituency are often expected to provide financial assistance to the most vulnerable members of their community, an act that also is part of the groundwork for future campaigns, highlighting the cyclical nature of the cost of politics. Some of the most common expectations involves helping poor constituents with money for their daughters' marriages, or for covering medical bills.³⁰

Advancing the agenda of supporters

MNAs are allocated development funds by the federal government. The most recent allocation, made in October 2022,³¹ granted each member PKR 500 million. There are allegations that kickbacks and corruption in the utilisation of these funds that allows candidates to recover some of their election costs through these projects at the same time as they support efforts to distribute patronage.³²

Prominent supporters and financiers of election campaigns also expect to be facilitated when they have dealings in government offices. Elected representatives are expected to assist them in bypassing typical bureaucratic red tape and to ensure their issues or demands are given priority. They also expect a certain degree of protection from the government when bypassing laws and rules, and in some cases, even when breaking the law.

For instance, in Rawalpindi, due to pressure from local MNAs, an anti-encroachment drive in one of the city's main commercial hubs was suspended by the district government.³³ Similarly, traders in Lahore and Rawalpindi, who largely support the current federal and Punjab governments, had a revenue drive by tax authorities suspended by using threats of violence, with tacit approval from their MNAs.

Sources of funding

The funding for elections can be viewed in three broad categories: candidates' own resources, support from local supporters and low-tier political workers, and party funding.

Personal finances

There was consensus among the interviewees that, over the years, the role of money in mainstream politics has significantly increased, and candidates with considerable resources are therefore better placed to contest elections. Most of the interviewees and a significant number of MNAs are multi-millionaires. A study published by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency reported that the average value of an MNA's assets in 2008-2009 was PKR 81 million.³⁴ This wealth comes from well-established businesses, landholdings, or is generational.

Candidates from smaller and left-leaning political parties lack the resources to compete effectively in this context and are more focused on registering their presence in the political arena than winning. Although the outcome of the 2024 elections, where in many instances well-resourced candidates were defeated by populist candidates with limited resources, showed that money is not everything, most interviewees were not very optimistic that this model could be sustained, citing the entrenched political and societal culture.

Local supporters and lower-tier political leadership

To understand the electoral landscape of Pakistan, it is also crucial to acknowledge the role of lower-tier political leaders in shaping a candidate's chances of winning. Many of these individuals have either previously served or remain active in local government structures, wielding significant influence within the political landscape of their constituencies. They possess the ability to sway voters in small blocks of 5,000-6,000 in ways which can significantly enhance a candidate's chances of success. They also serve as a direct link between the candidate and these groups of voters, and in many cases, voter outreach is managed through these individuals. In most cases, the support is provided in kind, such as providing cars, printing materials on the candidate's behalf, or arranging food at a meeting. In return, these individuals not only expect their candidate's support in their local elections, but also expect help in maintaining political control in their respective areas.

Party funding

Unlike developed democracies, where strong political parties form the backbone of their democratic system, political parties in Pakistan, are often family-run affairs, or centred around an individual. The three largest political parties, PPP, PML-N, and PTI have struggled to develop into stable political institutions as a result. When it comes to campaign financing, these parties lack formal mechanisms to support their candidates in elections and in most cases expect candidates to bankroll their own campaigns.

However, there are two exceptions to this general rule, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). In the 2024 elections, the MQM, which is primarily an urban based party in Sindh, was able to secure 17 National Assembly seats even though their candidates reported spending only a few thousand rupees from their pockets. The rest of the campaign expenses were taken care of by the party, who raised the resources required from donations from supporters and workers.

Non-financial costs

Damage to businesses and reputations

Politicians or aspirants to political office risk being targeted, both personally and financially by their rivals. The businesses of political aspirants are targeted, both by the military and officials from, or

aligned with, the ruling political party. A current MNA explained how his commercial building was declared illegal and then demolished. Another reported the closure of factories through environmental notices, income tax notices, and other actions by regulatory bodies. Recently, a sitting member of the opposition had his petrol pumps sealed in an attempt to pressure him to switch political allegiances. Another MNA's business premises were raided by security agencies, causing damage and causing equipment and materials losses.

All members of national and provincial assemblies, whether in government or opposition, are also marked as politically exposed persons, which makes it difficult for them to open bank accounts or access financial services such as credit cards, loans, and other facilities. One of the interviewees mentioned that she had to obtain special approvals from the state bank and secure a no-objection certificate from the Federal Board of Revenue before she could transfer small amount of money abroad to a family member.

Personal security under threat

During the process of arranging interviews for this research one potential interviewee's brother was picked up by security agencies and only returned home after 20 days. Another potential interviewee's sister-in-law was picked up while we were coordinating the time for our interview. These incidents were part of a broader effort to intimidate members of PTI though similar tactics have also been directed at other political parties in Pakistan in the past. Unfortunately, the political class in Pakistan, as well as society as a whole, has become so desensitised to these issues that these incidents are now considered a rite of passage for politicians. It is expected that every politician will face the high-handedness of the state and military at least once during their political careers.

But the security threat is not just posed by the state. Since the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 more than 60,000 Pakistanis have been killed in terrorist attacks across the country.³⁵ But these attacks are not limited to security establishments or bombings in highly-populated civilian areas. Terrorist groups have also sought to alter the country's political landscape through targeted attacks. Benazir Bhutto, head of the PPP, was attacked upon her return from exile in 2007 in Karachi. In the suicide bombing, which she survived, around 200 people were killed and 500 injured. However, in another attack in Rawalpindi just two months later, she was killed by a suicide bomber. Similarly, one of the interviewees, Samar Bilour, entered politics after her husband, Haroon Bilour, was killed in a suicide attack in 2018.³⁶ Haroon's father, Bashir Bilour, a senior member of the Awami National Party, had also been killed in a suicide attack in 2012. Security advisories are regularly issued to politicians, warning them that they are on the hit list of these terrorist groups.

The experience of Ali Wazir

The case of Ali Wazir, a former member of Pakistan's National Assembly, exemplifies the non-monetary cost of participating in politics in the country. Wazir was the founding member of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) a pressure group turned political party originally formed in 2014. PTM first came into the limelight as a movement advocating against human rights abuses in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The movement was unique in that it held the state, security forces, and militant groups equally responsible for violence in Pashtun areas across Pakistan's KP and Balochistan. PTM leaders were particularly vocal about extrajudicial killings, missing persons (or extrajudicial detention), and the need to remove landmines from Pashtun areas. Not surprisingly, the movement has had an uneasy relationship with the Pakistani state, although it has been a part of mainstream politics for some years, and sent two MNAs to the National Assembly, one of whom was Ali Wazir, in the elections of 2018.

Ali Wazir was placed in detention for short periods twice before 2018, but his first long-term imprisonment took place in 2019. He was arrested in May 2019, when he and another PTM leader were accused of attacking security forces during a protest at a checkpoint in North Waziristan. Wazir was released on bail four months later, and eventually acquitted in October 2020. But in December 2020, he was re-arrested, this time on sedition charges, and spent more than two years in jail. Released in February 2023, Wazir has been arrested in one case after another, with his most detention in August 2024 in Islamabad, following an incident when his car was involved in a minor accident in the city. His supporters allege that the accident was an excuse, and the law enforcement agencies had plans to detain him in any event. The fact that he remains in detention on charges of manhandling police personnel after the accident, and for allegedly carrying narcotics, a charge under which he is liable to be tried under anti-terrorism laws, gives credence to these claims. Ali Wazir's case highlights how the judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies can be politicised. Wazir has been in and out of jail for over five years, and in fact has spent most of his brief periods of freedom appearing in courts across the country to defend himself against a slew of charges. To date he has not been found guilty of any serious crime. Meanwhile, in a move that further endangers Wazir and other PTM leaders, the movement was declared as a proscribed organisation in October 2024.

Implications of the rising cost of politics

The evolution of Pakistan's political structure has squeezed the working and middle classes out of the political arena. Currently, almost all elected legislators, whether at the national or provincial levels, are individuals with considerable means at their disposal.³⁷ A reality that has serious implications for the democratic process and structures.

Excludes a plurality of voices

The role of money is a major deterrent for middle-class or lower-middle-class individuals looking to enter politics. Competing against well-established and financially strong candidates is an uphill task, and an undertaking that not many are willing to pursue. This dynamic significantly shrinks the political pool available in the country, leading to a loss of diversity within the political class. One interviewee mentioned that around 400 families in Pakistan effectively dominate the entire political landscape, and a number of them tend to frequently switch political allegiances for their own personal advantage.³⁸

Contributes to ideological bankruptcy

The excessive reliance on financial resources has marginalised ideology and given prominence instead to individuals who can not only fund their own campaigns, but also financially support the party. This has given rise to a political class commonly referred to as “electables.” These individuals possess significant financial resources and have cultivated strong political bases in their constituencies. But they are not committed to any particular ideology and, just before elections, typically align with the party most likely to secure victory.

Among political families, it is also very common for them to strategically allow multiple members, such as uncles, nephews, and brothers, to compete on various party tickets. These decisions are not ideologically driven but are primarily a pursuit of power with the ultimate aim to ensure that the family maintains its political hold over the area.

Heightens corruption

The link between money and electoral prospects has given rise to an endemic problem of corruption. The country ranks 133rd out of 180 countries, in Transparency International Corruption Perception Index.³⁹ It is widely accepted, that once elected, politicians' resort to corrupt and unethical practices to strengthen their financial positions, which they then use to maintain and expand their political influence within the party and their constituency. Kickbacks and the payment of bribes to secure government contracts for family and relatives are regarded as par for the course.

The large amounts of money spent during elections are typically recovered during the politician's time in office, making election expenditure a form of investment which demands a return. Interviewees reported numerous incidents where politicians used their influence to secure personal or financial gains. For instance, in Rawalpindi, prominent members of a political party were reported to have purchased land along the planned route of a ring road around the city, which was later sold at a much higher price after the project's approval. Some even alleged that the route of the road was altered to ensure it passed closer to their landholdings.

Elected members also often demand that the postings and transfers of police and revenue officials be carried out by the civil bureaucracy in consultation with them. This allows them, and their supporters, to wield influence over government officials, enabling them to maintain political and administrative control within their constituencies.

Distorts legislative and policy decisions

In a number of cases, laws and policies are made that are directly beneficial to the ruling elite and their business interests. For example, while agricultural tax is levied by provincial governments, it is a tax on cultivable land with very low rates, and not a tax on agricultural income.⁴⁰ This is advantageous for agriculturalists, specifically large landlords who are increasingly present in the legislature, and traders, who lobby extensively these elected representatives in an illustration of the way politics works, and for who. This distorted or skewed policymaking is often detrimental to wider development.

Maintains military influence

The military promotes and protects high net worth individuals, encourages them to join different parties, and in return expects elected politicians to help the military manage the political landscape of the country, and make sure their interests are served both inside and outside the parliament. This again not only distorts the democratic process and weakens democratic institutions, but also discredits the system in the eyes of the voters.

Recommendations

The report clearly illustrates that participating in politics in Pakistan requires a significant financial investment. This includes pre-campaign expenditure undertaken to gain recognition in the constituency; campaign expenditure, which typically far exceeds legal limits; election day outlays to ensure voter participation; and post-election expenditure which is undertaken to meet the expectations of constituents, particular those with significant political influence.

This multi-faceted expenditure is undertaken for many reasons. Some expenditure is meant to create goodwill in the constituency, or to communicate to people about the candidate's programme and electoral promises. But the majority is aimed at simply ensuring that the candidate's safety is ensured, and that they are able to fend off possible obstructions from political rivals. This state of affairs discourages aspiring politicians who are not financially strong, and those who are not willing, or able, to spend significant amounts of money to get elected. The implication of this is that only a limited cadre of elite families, many well established in politics, feel confident about entering the political fray, re-entrenching these problematic patterns as they do so. Recommendations that can help make a dent in this established culture include:

- **Stricter implementation of spending laws by ECP.** There needs to be thorough scrutiny of candidate's expenditure by ECP, with stricter enforcement of the existing laws and their accompanying penalties. Loopholes, such as those in Section 132(5) of the Elections Act must be repealed.
- **Revise campaign finance regulations.** There is a need to modernise existing political party finance (PPF) systems to make them more elaborate and transparent. One key issue in the current system is the absence of limits on the political party's spending during elections. Additionally, corporate funding is not adequately addressed. Following broad-based consultation on the PPF, a modern, robust, and transparent system should be established, one that can be effectively enforced by relevant authorities.
- **Strengthen political parties.** In parties like JI and MQM, where the party structure is stable and does not revolve around a specific person or family, there tend to be better opportunities for ordinary members to rise through the ranks. But in the three mainstream political parties in Pakistan dominant personalities not only weaken the party structure but also block candidates from diverse backgrounds from advancing. Effort can focus on enhancing the capacity of political parties, and encourage them to operate as a more democratic and transparent institutions, with equal opportunities for all members of the party to rise through the ranks. This could be done by ensuring that the party's internal governance structures are strong, credible intraparty elections take place on a consistent basis, and that finances are managed transparently. However, this is a long-term process of change and will only happen as a democratic culture evolves over time, and only if democratic processes continue uninterrupted.
- **Re-establish student unions.** Historically, one of the key nurseries for new leadership in Pakistan were student unions. Several of the current senior parliamentarians from middle-class

backgrounds gained their first experiences of politics through these structures. These platforms not only trained them in the basic art of politicking, but also provided them with a political base they could draw on when they entered mainstream politics. However, student unions were banned in Pakistan in 1984 and have never been fully restored. There is an urgent need to lift this ban and reinstate these platforms, to strengthen youth political engagement.

- **Empower the local government system.** Local governments traditionally provided a pathway for grassroots workers to start their political careers at the union council level, then progress to *tehsil*, and eventually contest for Provincial or National Assembly seats. But despite the 18th constitutional amendment devolving significant federal powers to the provinces, the provincial governments remain hesitant to establish fully empowered and democratically elected local governments. Not having elected local governments has closed off opportunities for new entrants into the political arena, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds. There needs to be a constant push from the civil society and other stakeholders to ensure that local body elections are held regularly, and to advocate for the devolution of adequate powers and financial resources to support these structures.
- **Improved constituency level engagement by elected representatives.** One of the challenges facing the electoral landscape is the size of constituencies, with rural constituencies often spread over vast areas. This is one of the key reasons the cost of running in elections is so high, as candidates have to reach out to a large number of voters spread over huge areas. There needs to be a debate on the size of the constituencies, and subsequent cost implications. With increasing the number of constituencies not a feasible option in the short to medium term, political aspirants need to improve outreach in large constituencies through social media or more grassroots structures.
- **Reduce the informal role of the military in politics.** One of the key hurdles in the development of political parties and the democratic system as a whole is the perpetual interference of the military. In addition to directly intervening in politics, the military bureaucracy continually seeks to create a new political class or elite that serve its interests. This new class, often referred to as 'parachuters,' disrupts and bypasses the traditional, gradual political ascent, ultimately entering the system on the back of their wealth and military's support. There needs to be sustained effort to strengthen key democratic institutions in the country, including the judiciary, to reduce the influence the military is able to exert over the political domain.
- **End the provision of development funds.** MNAs personalise development funds to maintain political networks and support. Restructuring this support so that it is channelled through local government or provincial structures, rather than elected individuals, can force MNAs to focus more on advancing a legislative agenda that is more transformational for development in their constituency.

Annex 1

The salary and perks provided to the members of National Assembly as per the Members of Parliament (Salaries & Allowances) Act, 1974, updated most recently in February 2025, can hardly be labelled as sufficient, when compared to those offered in government and private sector jobs in Pakistan. For most politicians, who are generally well-off, these amounts are quite insignificant and barely cover their personal expenses, let alone the costs associated with their political activities.

Table 2a: Pay and allowances of Member National Assembly per month (in PKR)

Pay/allowance	Member of National Assembly
Basic pay	519,000
Office maintenance allowance	8,000
Total	527,000

Table 2b: Other allowances (in PKR)

Allowance	MNA
For attending National Assembly sessions	
Daily allowance (ordinary)	2,800
Daily allowance (special)	4,800
Daily conveyance allowance	2,000
Daily housing allowance*	2,000
Travel allowance	
By air (business class)	150 per kilometre
By road	10 per kilometre
By rail	An amount equal to one air-conditioned class fare and one [second] class fare
Airline voucher	300,000
Train voucher	90,000
Medical allowance	
Reimbursed on actual bills	-

Source: National Assembly Secretariat

*In addition to the housing allowance an apartment is allocated to each member of National Assembly at Parliament Lodges in Islamabad.

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- ²⁰ Key informant interview
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