

RESEARCH INSIGHT

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Devolution under Autocracies: Evidence from Pakistan

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The objective of the research

Authoritarian regimes often direct the course of electoral politics in ways that allow them to concentrate and consolidate power (Geddes, 1999; Svobik, 2012; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Gandhi, 2015). While a growing body of literature has devoted attention to studying politics under authoritarian rule, devolution under dictatorship remains a relatively understudied aspect. Why do autocrats devolve power to the local level and

what are the long-run impacts of such devolution on political outcomes? In the present research, we have attempted to assess the impact of local government reforms carried out by Pakistan's military regime under General Zia-ul-Haq on the subsequent trajectory of electoral politics.

We argue that the local government reforms introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq and the associated institutional interventions were a critical juncture in Pakistan's electoral history and left an enduring legacy for dynastic politics. This prior is based on at least four factors that distinguish Zia-era from other military regimes in Pakistan. First, it marked a turning point in the suppression of mass politics, especially through banning a populist party operating outside the military's control. Second, while the devolution under Ayub Khan (Pakistan's first military dictator) maintained a bureaucratic representation in local bodies, Zia completely dispensed with this practice so that local bodies were now under the total control of elected representatives. Third, a more elaborate system of dispensing state patronage through special development funds was devised that solidified the electoral hold of local elites and ushered in a new period of electoral clientelism. Finally, due to his ideological leaning and, even more importantly, due to his political opportunism and pragmatism, General Zia wooed religious elites into the electoral fold.

The methodological approach

We draw on a rich dataset on genealogies of political families in Pakistani Punjab that we have recently compiled. This bespoke dataset allowed us to map a variety of dynasties, ranging from having just one relative contesting in an election to having dozens of relatives participating in different election rounds. We are also able to precisely identify the date of entry of each dynastic family into electoral politics. We define this as the date at which the founder of the dynasty formally entered an electoral cycle for the first time. Our data thus allows us to chart the evolution of dynasties over time, which is crucial to determining whether there is a noticeable shift in dynasticism during General Zia's military rule.

We combine the data on political genealogies with detailed data on all general elections held in the Punjab during the period 1970-2013. For a total of 10 elections held during this period we compiled constituency-level information on candidates' names, party affiliation, votes, total votes polled, and total number of registered voters. Such level of detail allows us to construct several time-varying measures of political competitiveness which we then utilize to construct measures of political competition before and after the Zia coup.

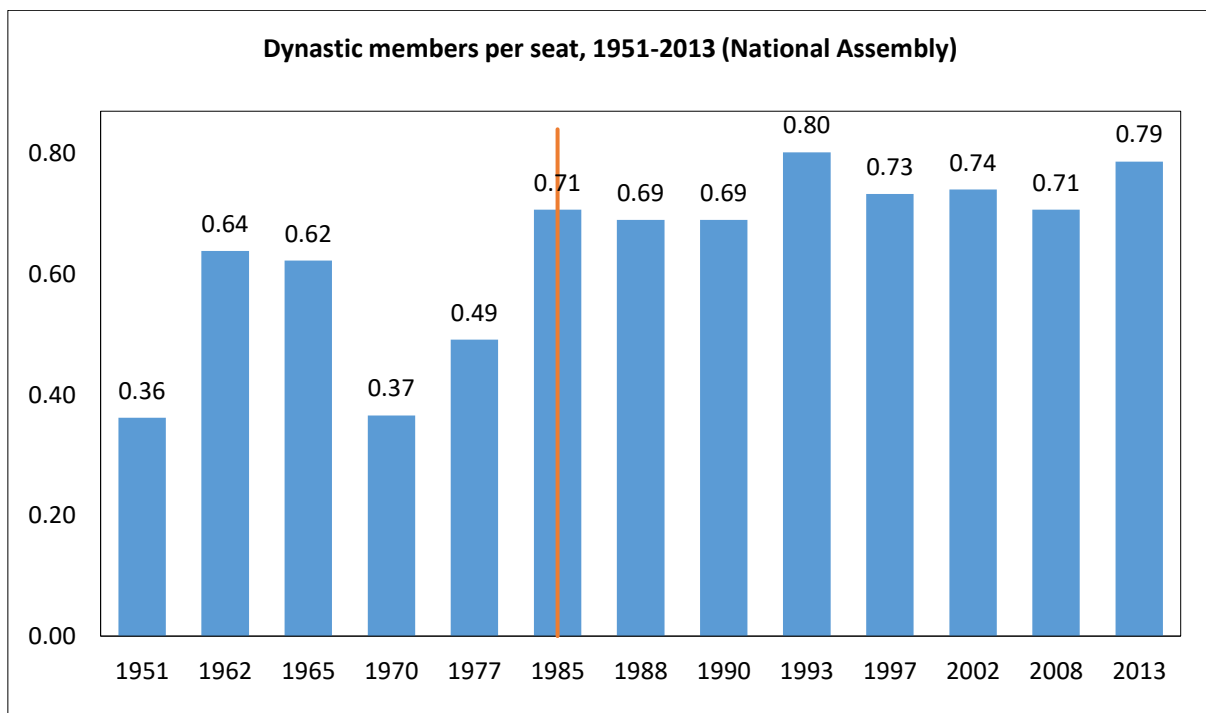
Our methodology remains essentially descriptive, consisting of comparing the values of a number of relevant indicators in the elections preceding the seizure of power by Zia with those observed in the elections organized after his death. Since there is no control for possible confounding factors, the results obtained must be considered as essentially exploratory. Yet, they must be taken seriously because they match the observations made in important works of political science and sociology devoted to Pakistan.

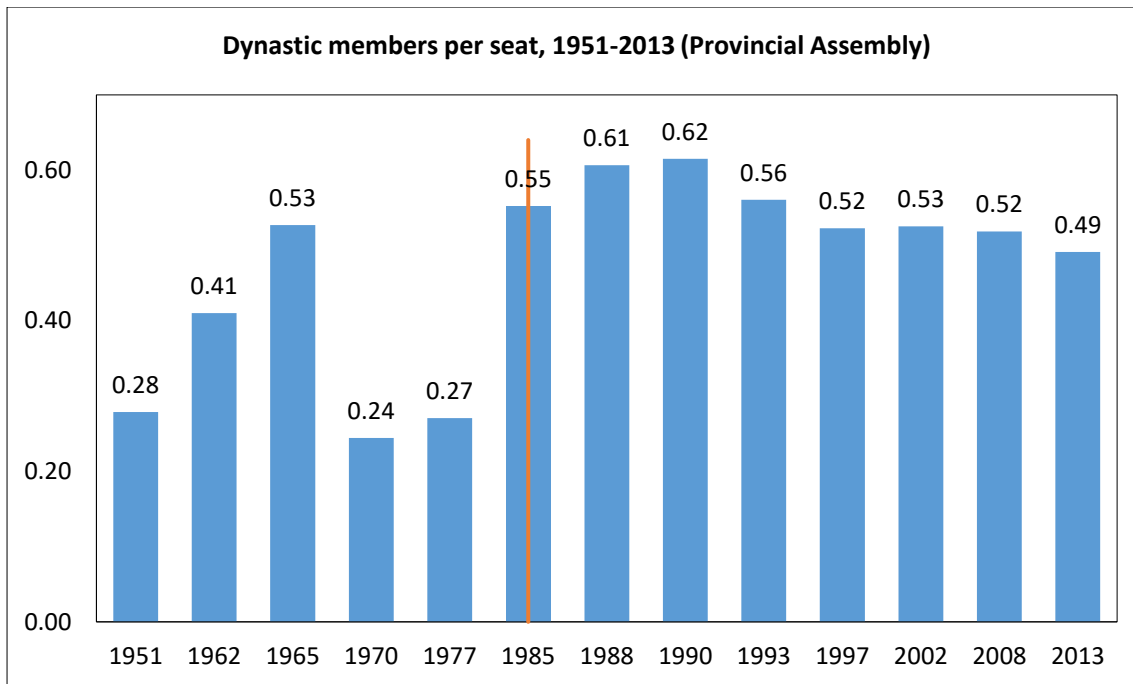
Central results

General Zia's local government elections provided the staging ground for the entry of new family-backed elites into electoral politics whose role persisted long after his departure in 1988. The empirical evidence we present shows a clear discontinuity in several key indicators at the point of entry of Zia on Pakistan's political stage. Specifically, we observe:

- A clear increase in the number of candidates coming from dynastic families who ran for elections in 1985, the first election held under the Zia regime. This increase is observed for both the national and the provincial assemblies. Moreover, in both assemblies the increase in the dynastic pool of candidates sustained itself and even increased over time during the post-Zia period. We verify that the increase is not driven by the mechanical effects of an increase in the size (i.e. number of seats) of both assemblies over time.

- The number of dynastic members per seat rose dramatically after the first general election held under General Zia in 1985, and then it remained consistently high from there. Therefore, the Zia-era reforms have permanently boosted the overall hold of dynasts over the national and provincial parliaments, as shown in the two figures below. Again, the effects are not driven by the mechanical effects of an increase in the size (i.e. number of seats) of both assemblies over time. It is noteworthy that the effect is markedly stronger for provincial assemblies than for the national parliament. Because special development funds assume particular importance at provincial level, this last finding is not surprising.
- The same conclusion holds when we distinguish between urban and rural constituencies.
- A clear majority of founders of dynasties entered parliament for the first time in the two general elections that were held under or immediately after the Zia regime: 1985 and 1988.
- The proportion of Zia-era dynastic families (those founded on the occasion of Zia's rise to power) that contested elections was quite high throughout the post-Zia period.
- The rise in the incidence of political dynasties under Zia happened in a context of greater political competition, which we have measured in different ways (including the number of candidates per seat).





Conclusion and policy implications

The devolution reforms enacted by Zia, coupled with the new mode of channelling development funds and the politicization of the bureaucracy, have stimulated the rise of family politics in replacement of party politics. New political dynasties thus emerged while pre-existing political families were consolidated. More ominously, the Zia-era reforms institutionalized the political subordination of bureaucracy that had started in the Bhutto era but has now become a key instrument for state capture by local politicians. It is a fundamental part of the logic of clientelism that greases the wheels of electoral politics.

In a companion paper (Malik et al., 2021), we have shown that such clientelistic competition matters in the context of dynastic politics. Indeed, in constituencies where dynasts have won elections (by a close margin), development outcomes are significantly worse than in constituencies where non-dynasts have (narrowly) won over dynasts. The implication is that, in their ambition to create legitimacy for their regimes, Pakistan's military rulers have ended up entrenching a harmful clientelistic political system which they did not invent (the origin of the system can be traced back to colonial times) but dramatically re-activated.

Another major policy lesson from the Pakistani experience is that an increase of political competition, an undeniable upshot of the new political system initiated under Zia, is no guarantee that politics works better. In this instance, it has reflected the fact that competition between political parties organized around policy agenda and explicit ideologies has given way to competition between political families as a way to maintain their social and political domination. Our research offers a subtle point—which is that enhanced competition between individual candidates at the constituency-level can go hand in hand with the strengthening of political families acting as collective actors. A dynastic political family has several members contesting elections in various constituencies, and while one member may fail to win the seat in one constituency, another could win it in another.

In a more fundamental way, our study shows the limits of a democratization agenda that solely revolves around holding frequent and regular elections. The context in which elections take place and the rules of the political game may be such that quasi-feudal forces can be called into play that undermine the beneficial effects of open political contests. In other words, there is a need to go behind the formal appearances of democracy to discover how outcomes are shaped and which powerful actors play a key role. This emphasis is consistent with the recent experience of holding elections in other fragile contexts, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Elections in these contexts were reduced to a contest between factional elites that determined who controls the spoils of the state.

The last lesson bears special emphasis in the light of the fact that foreign donors such as DfiD and USAID directly supported devolution programmes under military regimes in Pakistan, especially the Musharraf regime.

The USAID, for example, devoted nearly 15 millions dollars (14, 829,000) to support “Democratic Local Government and Decentralization” during the Musharraf period. The USAID devolution programme was a key constituent initiative of their country programme during the decade of 2000s when General Musharraf was in power.

DfiD’s contribution to Musharraf’s devolution was most significant since its sub-national governance programme (SNG) was a key arm for delivering financial and technical support. While this usually consisted of technocratic support aimed at improving the capacity of provincial and local governments to deliver health and education services, it lacked any deep appreciation of the local political economy. Other foreign donors that supported devolution included the UNDP and Germany’s GIZ. While much of this donor engagement has been framed in pro-development jargon, such as promoting local participation, accountability and state capacity, the fact of the matter is that they have essentially enabled a centralized effort of authoritarian power sharing.

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