

When Does an Opposition Party Cooperate? Issue-Specific Strategies of the Pakistan People's Party in Pakistan's National Assembly, 1990-2018



Amina Saif ^a Adil Zaman ^b Muhammad Mushtaq ^c

Abstract: *This article examines the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as an opposition party under different political and institutional conditions in Pakistan. While the PPP's transformation from confrontational politics in the 1990s to pragmatism and reconciliation after the Charter of Democracy has been documented, there has been no systematic explanation for differences in the party's stance across individual government proposals. The study addresses this gap through a qualitative and longitudinal comparison of major legislative and political events during the PPP's opposition periods of 1990–1993, 1997–1999, and 2013–2018. Drawing on National Assembly proceedings, constitutional and legislative records, party and institutional sources, and comparative and Pakistan-specific scholarship, it identifies three types of opposition behaviour: Adversarial Opposition, Conditional Cooperation, and Consensus Support. The evidence indicates that the PPP was more cooperative when proposals aligned with its preferences for democratic reform, electoral continuity, federal inclusion, and significant institutional goals. It was less cooperative when national-security goals conflicted with constitutional or civil-liberty objectives, when proposals threatened judicial or opposition rights, or when economic costs did not align with party preferences. The findings indicate that the transformation after 2008 reflected not simply a reduction in conflict but an increasing divergence between policy opposition, government opposition, and support for the continuation of the democratic process. Rather than uniformly opposing or supporting governments, the PPP adopted issue-specific strategies shaped by policy preferences, institutional considerations, and democratic commitments. The study extends the notion of conditional opposition by demonstrating how opposition behaviour varies across issues and political contexts.*

Keywords: Parliamentary Opposition, Pakistan People's Party, Government-Opposition Relations, Conditional Opposition, Parliamentary Strategy, Constitutional Amendments, Pakistan, National Assembly

Introduction

Opposition in Parliament is vital to representative democracy, and opposition does not mean that one automatically or permanently refuses to cooperate with government. Opposition parties challenge executives, offer alternative solutions, monitor the government, seek electoral advantage, and challenge incumbent leaders. They also consistently support government policies, negotiate amendments, sign into cross-party constitutional settlements, and work together in times of crisis. In opposition behaviour, therefore, is not a disposition but a strategy that is shaped by institutional settings, policy preferences, electoral incentives, and the substantive nature of legislation (Garritzmman, 2017, pp. 1-6; Louwerse et al., 2017, pp. 746-50; Wegmann, 2022, pp. 1-5).

This problem has been honed by recent scholarship. Van Well argues that opposition parties face vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking simultaneously. Policy influence may be achieved through support for government legislation, whereas opposition can offer more electoral benefits when government performance declines, when differences between parties become more prominent to voters. (Van Well 2025,

^a M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

^b Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

^c Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

895-901). The question that matters is not whether opposition parties cooperate, but under what circumstances do they decide to cooperate rather than oppose?

This issue has received relatively limited consideration in studies of parliamentary politics in Pakistan. The scholarship on Pakistan has predominantly focused on democratic instability, civil-military relations, government disintegration, party rivalry, institutional problems, constitutional disputes, and the "war of ideas" in the 1990s. In this literature, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has mostly been discussed in the general context of historical change. Confrontation, agitation, and efforts to undermine the strength of competing governments defined its opposition politics in the 90s. After the Charter of Democracy and successive democratic failures, its interaction with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) became more pragmatic and reconciling (Amin, 1995, pp. 140-46; Chawla & Ullah, 2018, pp. 1-14; Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq, 2025, pp. 396-404). The literature on the project also shows that the political repertoire of the PPPs has significantly changed over time, particularly from the 1990s to the Fourteenth National Assembly.

This is a period-level interpretation but not complete. In the very confrontational 90's, the PPP was not uniform. For instance, it joined the PML-N government during the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment in 1997, only to support the anti-defection goal of the Fourteenth Amendment, but opposed the Ehtesab framework and anti-terror legislation, and also objected to the Fifteenth Amendment. Likewise, the more peaceable policies of 2013-2018 were not unconditional pro-government policies. The PPP supported electoral and federal reform, enthusiastically passed the Twenty-First and Twenty-Third Amendments during the 'national-security emergency' and voiced concerns about military courts, and worked on the FATA merger, but had a far more hostile attitude to taxation, privatization, budgetary allocation, accountability, and some coercive legislative tactics.

The analytical problem then is one of within-party variation across issues. It is hard to explain how the PPP has been "confrontational" at one time and "reconciliatory" at another, given its cooperation on some issues during the 1990s and resistance to certain policies during the latter "reconciliatory" period. The unit of analysis, then, needs to shift from the parliamentary term to the government proposal or a significant policy moment.

This article contains four questions. Why did PPP oppose some government proposals and support others during its time of opposition (1990-2018)? Second, how did the characteristics of different issues (including constitutional reform, national security, accountability, civil liberties, and economic policy) influence opposition strategy? Third, what did bargaining opportunities, government strength, institutional context, and the threat of democratic failure have to do with these substantive considerations? Lastly, was the PPP's post-2008 trajectory a general upward trend towards collaboration, or a more nuanced trend towards identifying policy disagreement from rejection of an elected government?

It is argued that the opposition of the PPPs can be better explained in terms of conditional and issue-based opposition rather than a continuum from confrontation to accommodation, based on a comparative analysis of the opposition literature and evidence derived from Pakistan's parliamentary records. There are three general strategic shapes to be distinguished. Opposition against government measures or actions was termed "adversarial opposition" and included work to oppose, defeat, delegitimize, or mobilize against government actions. Conditional Cooperation was defined as support for the general goal of a measure, but an effort to obtain protection, changes, restrictions, or concessions. Consensus support emerged when the PPP saw a proposal as consistent with democratic change, federal accommodation, electoral continuity, or other goals that extended beyond the immediate government-opposition dynamic.

This framework does not assume that "cooperation" is always "the good thing" as compared to "confrontation". Comparative scholarship rather argues that opposition must be pragmatic in differentiating itself in the electoral market from the government and pursue policy goals to influence policy outcomes (Moury & De Giorgi, 2015, pp. 1-7). In some circumstances, the role of the resistance is a key accountability role, while in others, bargaining can yield more influence in policy. The aim here is thus explanatory, not

evaluative, and it is meant to explain conditions under which different opposition strategies are more likely to emerge.

In one further respect, the Pakistani case enriches that literature. Whereas, comparatively with other well-developed parliamentary democracies studied, Pakistani opposition parties have faced constant threats of democratic interruption. In some instances, the strategic decision confronting opposition actors has gone beyond supporting a specific government proposal. Parties have also had to grapple with the more fundamental issue of whether opposition strategies could contribute to the premature ouster of an elected government or undermine the parliamentary system as a whole. This historical experience is significant in the current post-Charter of Democracy environment and provides a contextual mechanism for rethinking the opposition-government-regime continuum.

Parliamentary Opposition as Strategic Choice: Literature and Analytical Framework.

From Government-Opposition Dichotomy to Strategic Opposition

Although the presence of an opposition party is a feature of parliamentary democracy, the power of opposition can differ markedly between legislatures. Garritzmann notes that there is vast cross-national variation in the opportunities available to opposition parties, as some institutions enable opposition actors to control government, while others allow them the opportunity to propose alternatives (Garritzmann, 2017, pp. 1-6). Wegmann also demonstrates that the formal power of opposition actors varies based on the rules of the legislature, the opportunities for opposition participation, and the organization of the legislative chambers (Wegmann, 2022, pp. 1-5). These methods move analysis beyond the assumption of opposition relevance, as what matters is "seat share."

This institutional approach is significant since parliamentary opposition has several roles. It can aim to replace the government, stand out in elections, shape government policy, reveal administrative shortcomings, and defend procedural or constitutional principles. These goals may go in various directions. An electoral differentiation strategy can limit the ability to influence and shape government policy; compromise can potentially further policy preferences, but with reputational costs to those who want to see opposition to government.

Van Well focuses on this trade-off in opposition legislative activity. Opposition parties consider goals of winning votes, winning offices, and shaping policy and adjust their opposition to government bills based on those goals. The likelihood of support is therefore affected not only by ideological distance but also by anticipated change in government, coalition prospects, and bill-specific incentives (Van Well, 2025, pp. 895-903).

Implication is crucial for Pakistan. The term "opposition party" is not sufficient on its own to determine how the PPP should react to a constitutional amendment, a security emergency, a budget, an accountability law, or an electoral reform. Such suggestions could trigger various aspects of the party's interests and institutional obligations.

Conflict, Cooperation, and Parliamentary Bargaining

The government - opposition split remains a major theme in parliamentary politics, although the degree of conflict in voting patterns varies considerably across issues. In the case of voting patterns between government and opposition, Louwerse et al. show that government majority, ideological placement, and norms of government alternation have affected voting behaviour (Louwerse et al., 2017, pp. 746-51). Their analysis challenges the notion that opposition parties should be antagonistic in all political situations.

Moury and De Giorgi express the dilemma very succinctly. Opposition parties can take advantage of government weakness and enhance the differences between them and the government to increase their chances of being elected, but can also collaborate when the context of the country or the available policy opportunities makes influencing the government more valuable than opposing it (Moury & De Giorgi, 2015,

pp. 1-7). Their work also draws attention to policy domains; conflict is not equally likely across issues. An economic crisis and distributive concerns can deepen partisan differences, while a nationally agreed-upon institutional goal can increase consensus.

Cooperation can be encouraged by institutional leverage. Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer argue that veto power can lead to bargaining because governments expect opposition to be able to raise its voice and have an interest in satisfying opposition preferences before decisions are made (2021, 921-27). In this sense, opposition doesn't have to result in paralysis; it can set the conditions for negotiated compromise.

This point is especially applicable in the context of constitutional amendments in Pakistan. Opposition support wasn't just symbolic, where a government didn't have the supermajority needed to change the Constitution. There was a need for government negotiations. The study has pointed out that in 2013-2018 certain constitutional measures were not enacted by the PML-N without the cooperation of opposition parties. This established a quite different legislative process from the normal type, which is passed by a simple majority in government.

Why Opposition Parties Support Government Proposals

There are several reasons in the modern literature why opposition parties may support government legislation. The least complicated form is policy congruence - an opposition party may just want the substantive outcome that the government is proposing to the status quo. However, it is not only about policy proximity. Bargaining can be used to persuade a party to accept one of many generally acceptable offers, or to get them to agree to a less attractive option if the threat of rejection is unusually high, or if the threat concerns the electoral basis and affects the party's political success.

Van Well's model has the advantage of incorporating policy-, vote- and office-seeking motivations. Opposition parties are more likely to support the government's legislation when policy influence is achievable or when it is strategic to keep the government in power, and more likely to oppose when it is possible to change the government or to differentiate the electorate. (Van Well 2025, 895-903)

Tuttnauer and Hazan incorporate an institutional angle, demonstrating how rules governing termination affect conflictual-cooperative balance. Opposition parties have increased incentives to influence the policy process rather than constantly attempt to terminate governments, when replacing them is institutionally challenging (Tuttnauer & Hazan, 2024, pp. 984-90). Their findings are based on an analysis of 59 opposition parties in 16 countries and show that the more restrictive the no-confidence rules, the less conflictual the legislative behavior.

The logic is helpful, even if the Pakistani context is different. The Government's survival was challenged on more than one occasion in the 1990s, outside of the normal electoral cycle. Both parties suffered early ousting and were frequently seen as a potential political solution. In the aftermath of the democratic failure in 1999 and the Charter of Democracy of 2006, the price of hasty government abandonment became more prominent. The strategic environment created by these developments shifted the relative value of replacing the government versus influencing it, within the context of maintaining elected tenure.

Issue Type and Opposition Strategy

The second major explanatory axis is provided by issue type. Based on an analysis of opposition behaviour as a function of the substantive terrain on which government and opposition interact, Moury and De Giorgi (2015, 4-8) have concluded that opposition behaviour varies by the substance of the terrain. The Pakistan case is, in some respects, a particularly good illustration of the differences between the five domains.

Constitutional and democratic reform is defined as changes that impact the powers of the president, party discipline, electoral institutions, representation, federal relations, and the structure of elected government. Where both the opposition and the government share an interest in changing institutional arrangements

inherited from authoritarian rule or ensuring electoral continuity, such questions can produce an across-party consensus.

National security and exceptional legislation present a separate challenge. An opposition party might agree that there is a need for security but be wary of extraordinary coercive powers, military jurisdiction, due process, and the loss of civilian legal institutions. Conditional cooperation is especially appropriate in such instances.

Accountability and executive powers may lead to greater conflict where opposition parties suspect that seemingly neutral laws are intended to serve partisan interests. The design and accountability of accountability institutions are particularly contentious in Pakistan due to its political culture of selective accountability.

Judicial independence, minority rights, provincial autonomy, extraordinary courts, detention, and due process are examples of civil liberties and constitutional rights. Any move which is seen as threatening these safeguards can trigger opposition on the other side, even if the authorities invoke security or public order considerations.

Lastly, economic and distributive policy includes taxes, spending, privatization, public-sector pay, transfers to provinces and budget priorities. These are likely to remain more partisan since the material costs and benefits are spread out, and because they offer tangible chances to differentiate in the election. In spite of the broader reconciliatory atmosphere, Adil and Afridi's research on financial legislation between 2013 and 2018 indicates continued conflict between the opposition and the government (Adil & Afridi, 2021, pp. 174-83).

Opposition under Democratic Fragility

The particular contribution of the Pakistan-specific scholarship is a concept that is less central to much of the existing parliamentary democracy literature: fragility of democracy. The late 1990s were a highly confrontational period in which opposition politics regularly extended beyond legislative contestation toward efforts to cheer on the downfall of incumbent governments (Amin, 1995, pp. 140-46). The conflict between the government and opposition is also a recurring theme in Pakistan's democratic history, as highlighted by Rehman, Khan and Khan (2017, 24-33).

Read in this context the following politics of pragmatism and reconciliation of the PPP. Chawla and Ullah find pragmatism in the strategic adaptation of the PPP; and the project's published study documents a larger shift from confrontational opposition in the 1990s to more cooperative parliamentary engagement since 2008 (Chawla & Ullah, 2018, pp. 1-14; Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 396-404).

The Charter of Democracy was significant as it was a clear example of PPP and PML-N learning from the previous 10 years: both parties had benefited from the political downfall of the other; the democratic government was weak, and the other was strong. Analytically, this entailed a differentiation between government competition and regime maintenance. The opposition party(s) could question the ruling party without promoting complementary extra-parliamentary processes to end elected rule.

An example of this can be seen in the 2014 protests by the PTI, which were met with repression from the PPP. Existing research conducted in Pakistan so far has portrayed the PPP as critical of the PML-N but hesitant to resist a course that is regarded as endangering elected continuity. The party thus acted at the same time as an opponent of the government and supporter of the parliamentary regime. The term "friendly opposition" simply does not do justice to this; it does not mean that the opposition was directed at a different object.

Three Modes of Opposition Strategy

There is literature and empirical evidence that supports a three-part typology.

Adversarial Opposition: Adversarial opposition is when a party tries to oppose, obstruct, discredit, or mobilize politically against a government proposal. This does not mean that the behaviour is anti-democratic; adversarial resistance may be seen as a fundamental accountability role when opposition feels that there is a threat to constitutional rights, institutional balance, or distributive interest. The prominent Indicators include: opposition to the measure; Hostile floor debate; Blocking amendments; Boycotts or protests; Public mobilization; and Failure to provide cooperation in agreeing

Conditional Cooperation: Conditional cooperation is between rejection and complete acceptance. The opposition agrees with the overall purpose of the proposals but calls for certain safeguards, modifications, restrictions, procedures, amendments, or sunset dates. This is likely to be the case when two factors conflict, such as when national security needs justify support, and constitutional concerns justify resistance.

Consensus Support: Consensus support is the situation in which opposition parties generally agree on the proposal and regard its objectives as sufficiently compatible with their own institutional, constitutional, or policy goals to explain cross-party cooperation. The key difference is one of content, not of polite speech. An opposition party may strongly protest against the government on other issues but support a specific reform. There are empirical examples of all three in the Pakistan literature. The PPP's attitude toward constitutional amendments during 2013-2018 was not the same but rather a single pluralistic one, as documented by Gohar, Sumayya and Sarwat (2022, 59-66).

Analytical Expectations

The seven expectations are taken from the literature. First, democratic-stakes expectation: Cooperation should be more likely if the PPP believes a proposal will be strengthening elected institutions, electoral continuity, federal inclusion, or constitutional normalization. Second, rights-threat expectation: opposition by adversaries increases when actions are seen as likely to reduce judicial independence, civil liberties, provincial autonomy, political opposition, or constitutional checks. Third, policy-congruence expectation: Proposals that are closer to the PPP preferences established in the literature are expected to be more popular. Fourthly, bargaining opportunity expectation: conditional cooperation is likely to occur more often when the PPP's votes are required, or negotiation can realistically change the proposal. Fifth, majoritarian constraint expectation: if the government can enact bills without any support from opposition parties, then the reason to negotiate cooperation should reduce, and there may be more cases of symbolic or adversarial opposition. Sixth, democratic norms and expectations: the PPP should be more likely to distinguish between policy resistance and efforts to oust the government too early, given the democratic experiences of the 1990s and the Charter of Democracy. Seventh: issue-specific expectation: the level of cooperation needed to enact constitutional and federal reform should be higher than with distributive economic policy; the degree of coercion required in civil-liberty law should be higher than that for security law. The expectations structure the empirical comparison that follows.

Research Design and Methodology

The study design is a qualitative, longitudinal, within-party and within-country comparison. Rather than examining the entire period of the government as a single observation, it analyses major government proposals and policy episodes that were opposed by the PPP during its tenure in opposition.

There are two reasons why this design is suitable. First, by controlling for the opposition party, some of the variation that makes cross-party comparisons difficult is eliminated. The PPP has a more durable organizational identity and historical tradition than three unrelated parties, and its overall ideological focus is clearer than the profile of the other three. Second, variation in its reaction to the proposals allows a study of the relationship between changes in the type of proposal, institutional interest, bargaining power, and political context and the changes in strategy.

The cases are drawn from the PPP's opposition periods of 1990-1993, 1997-1999, and 2013-2018. The published articles identify a large number of parliamentary documents across these three periods, with a particular focus on constitutional amendments, economic laws, budget debates, accountability, and security laws. The study specifically regards these debates of the National Assembly as key primary sources.

The principal cases are purposefully selected to ensure maximum variance in terms of issue type and observed PPP strategy. They include the Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Twenty-First, Twenty-Second, Twenty-Third, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Fifth Constitutional Amendments; the 1997 Ehtesab legislation; anti-terrorism legislation; the Protection of Pakistan legislation; selected budget and finance measures; and the 2014 political crisis as a boundary case involving government survival rather than a single bill.

The principal evidence consists of National Assembly procedures and legislative documents. The project bibliography lists the debates relating to the Shariah legislation of 1991, Twelfth Amendment of July 1991, Transfer of Managed Establishments legislation, Ehtesab Bill of May 1997, Thirteenth Amendment of April 1997, Fourteenth Amendment of July 1997, Anti-Terrorism Bill of August 1997, general budget debate of June 1997, Protection of Pakistan Bill and the Twenty-First Amendment, among others. These are complemented by constitutional histories, institutional reports, scholarly articles, the Charter of Democracy and subsequent reports on the Fourteenth National Assembly.

The purpose of secondary literature is twofold. Comparative scholarship provides conceptual outlooks on opposition objectives, institutional opportunity, bargaining, issue impacts, and government survival. Historical interpretation and independent treatment of particular episodes are provided by Pakistan-focused scholarship. The work of Amin, Azeem and Tabassum, Chawla and Ullah, Rehman, Khan and Khan, Adil and Afridi, Gohar and colleagues, Jamil, Ahmed and Butt, and Saif, Zaman and Mushtaq is of special importance.

A series of questions is used to evaluate each case: What kind of problem did this case involve? What was the government's proposal? What was the starting point for the PPP? What democratic or constitutional issues did PPP representatives see? Was the measure close to the known policy preferences of the party? Does the PPP option have the potential to change the legislation? What tactics did they come up with: opposition, conditional cooperation, or consensus support? Lastly, what happened in the legislature or politically?

The design does not assert that documentary evidence will reveal all of the internal motivations of party leaders. Statements made in Parliament can be strategic in themselves. The study does not, therefore, make assumptions about private intentions when such are not apparent in the sources. It compares publicly expressed objections, voting practices, negotiating stances, and observable parliamentary results with the expectations based on the literature.

Empirical Analysis: Issue-Specific Opposition Strategies of the PPP

Constitutional Reform and Democratic Institutionalization: The Politics of Consensus

The best proof that the PPP opposition strategy is not an exclusively period-level opposition is its constitutional reform. The 1997-1999 period is particularly interesting as the same opposition party faced the same PML-N government and took totally different stances on each successive constitutional proposal.

The Thirteenth Amendment was the most uniform in the extent of agreement. Article 58(2)(b), which had provided the President with the authority to dissolve elected governments, was deleted from the amendment. Pakistan had become familiar with the experience of Presidential dismissal, and both PPP and PML-N were affected by it (Khan, 2021, pp. 448-49). While the representatives of the PPP supported the amendment and considered it a democratic achievement, PPP members also worked with the government in removing a provision linked to the repeated dismissal of elected governments. This episode aligns with policy congruence and democratic expectations. The idea of both parties was to create an institutional goal that each wanted to benefit: to limit the president's power to dismiss elected governments. Opposition support

cannot therefore be taken as a weakness or “friendliness” alone. It was an instance of converging institutional preferences.

The episode is also analysed here by Parveen as a collaboration between government and opposition, rather than merely as an expression of partisan rivalry, which is his treatment of the Thirteenth Amendment (2017, 102-9). More broadly, Azeem and Tabassum's work on opposition politics in Pakistan offers historical evidence for their claim that in certain areas where the stakes are institutional, larger-than-partisan, and constitutional, opposition parties can work together (2018, 57-73).

The 14th Amendment is a more qualified example. Its anti-defection aim reflected the unsettling influences of horse trading and floor crossing, which had been a cause of political instability. Therefore, the general concept of PPP was compatible with the interest in party institutionalization. But the same amendment also gave party leadership greater control over lawmakers and raised questions about parliamentarians acting independently. The PPP's stance was then one of compliance, but with some hesitation. This is more of an attitude of conditional co-operation than consensus.

The difference between the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth is a valuable analytical one, since the other circumstances were largely unchanged: the same government, the same opposition, the same parliamentary session, and in general the same leadership. The changes were in the substance of the proposal. The various responses thus reinforce the argument that issue characteristics proved important.

The post-2013 constitutional record is another example. At the same time, describing the general positive contribution of the PPP in the constitutional amendment in the PML-N government, Gohar and Sumayya present contrasting stances on specific amendments (2022, 59-66). The Election Commission (Section 22) was a priority for the PPP as electoral institutional reform was generally aligned with its democratic agenda. The party, however, condemned aspects of the process and restricted discussion, suggesting that support for institutional goals did not mean that the process could not be criticized.

Another instance of strategic accommodation can be found in the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the Constitution following the 2017 census. PPP leaders, especially those in Sindh, had doubts about the census results, but the party had embraced a constitutional process intended to avoid any delay of the 2018 electoral schedule. The published project study characterizes this as cooperation because they feared that the elections were delayed; it would cause “discontinuity” (Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 401-2).

In the case of the merger of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment and FATA, it is an even clearer case of consensus support. The PPP had already made a public pledge to mainstream FATA and had suggested its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study summarizes Naveed Qamar's arguments, which build on his argument that the reform would eliminate an institutional legacy from the colonial era and promote integration and rights. The government's proposal here was rather similar to an earlier PPP preference. Cooperation was thus not a question of surrender, though, and seemed to be legitimate on the grounds of federal inclusion and equal citizenship.

In these cases, constitutional cooperation can't be accounted for by the general process of reconciliation, let alone by just government power. The PPP cooperated most fully when institutional reform coincided with its own expressed constitutional preferences, such as limiting the powers of the president to remove judges, increasing the number of presidential elections, and incorporating FATA. It was only conditionally where the institutional aim was desirable but specific arrangements raised concerns.

Civil Liberties, Executive Power, and Accountability: The Politics of Resistance

Where constitutional institutionalization was likely to promote cooperation, proposals that were seen as broadening the scope of state coercion or that were likely to limit opponents' rights were likely to generate a very different pattern.

Special courts to conduct speedy trials were established under the Twelfth Amendment of 1991 due to concern about serious crime and public order. PPP officials have vehemently countered the bill, saying it is an assault on judicial independence, provincial autonomy and political opposition. The study includes Aitzaz Ahsan's characterization of the measure as resembling a coercive colonial apparatus, and details opposition concerns regarding the appointment and jurisdiction of judges. The amendment won 152 votes to 33, despite opposition from the PPP. The significance of this episode is the type of objection. The party went further than simply claiming that the government's criminal-justice policy was 'inefficient'. It presented the proposal as a constitutional challenge to extraordinary institutions and potential partisan abuse. This is directly related to the expectation of rights threat.

A similar pattern was created by the Ehtesab law of 1997. Although accountability was not necessarily incompatible with PPP preferences, the party perceived the institutional design as allowing the executive to use partisans against the party. The opposition criticism was directed not at the government's rejection of accountability itself, but its control over accountability mechanisms. There is an analytical relevance to this split in the bill - opposition was driven by a disagreement over who would dominate the accountability institution and how it would be used.

The issue of politically selective accountability was particularly relevant in Pakistan's history. Neutral accountability design is crucial because, as noted in the wider literature on political parties in Pakistan, parties are easily susceptible to institutional and extra-parliamentary pressures (Mufti, Shafqat and Siddiqui 2020, 15-35).

The Anti-Terrorism Bill of 1997 also involved public-security interests with civil-liberty issues. The PPP opposed provisions it viewed as expanding exceptional state authority and discouraging ordinary judicial protection. The party's stance highlights the fact that national consensus was not a given after the adoption of security legislation, but required the cooperation of the party - which was contingent on the institutional vehicle in which the security goals were articulated.

Perhaps the most vehement constitutional opposition of the second PML-N government came from the Fifteenth Amendment. The PPP, already promoting Islamization, said the move had the potential to centralise power in the hands of the prime minister and that it could undermine the autonomy of provinces and democratic freedoms. The study noted Khursheed Shah's claim that the government was trying to bring 'dictatorship in the name of Islam', with the PPP and other opposition parties opposing the amendment. The bill received approval from the National Assembly, but it did not achieve a majority in the Senate. The published article on the project also discusses the amendment as a significant example of principled opposition against executive aggrandizement (Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 400-401).

These episodes confuse any claim that constitutional issues naturally generate consensus. But it's not just whether an issue is "constitutional"; it's the direction constitutional change is going. Reforms that seemed to consolidate parliamentary continuity or federal inclusion brought cooperation, while those that seemed to expand coercive authority or diminish checks brought resistance.

There's the post-2008 accountability comparison, as added by the Panama Papers scandal in 2016. The PPP insisted on accountability of PM Nawaz Sharif and did not simply stop criticizing because of its conciliatory approach to democratic continuity. Studies conducted in Pakistan on the episode describe the need for investigation and accountability and argue that the party's strategy is different from that of proponents of immediate extra-parliamentary removal of the government (Gohar, Khan and Noareen 2022, 111-18).

This difference is really fundamental. The PPP could call for government accountability without requiring the collapse of the entire parliamentary system as a result - and without it being the desired outcome - between 2013 and 2018. Opposition had become more differentiated, with the object of opposition more differentiated.

National Security and Exceptional Legislation: Conditional Cooperation under Crisis

Conditional cooperation is evident in the security policy, where the national urgency and constitutional concern ran side by side. The Twenty-First Amendment came in the wake of the attack on Army Public School in December 2014 and introduced a constitutional exception for military courts in the trial of certain offences related to terror. Parties were under intense pressure to show unity against terrorism due to the political situation. The outcome of the PPP was support for the amendment; however, the support was accompanied by significant misgivings within the party regarding military jurisdiction, constitutionalism, and civilian judicial institutions.

The study explicitly mentions the exceptional security context and the party's situation with regard to military courts. Gohar, Sumayya, and Sarwat also note that the role of the PPP in the Twenty-First Amendment was only one of a series of positive, although qualified, involvements in constitutional development in the 2013-2018 period (2022, 59-66). This is more of a compromise than a simple consensus or opposition. The PPP agreed to the immediate security goal but was uneasy about the institutional arrangement chosen to achieve it. The pattern of conditional cooperation is exactly this:

The extension of the period of military courts via the 23rd Amendment of 2017 brought the situation full circle. By that time, the emergency justification was in question because the highly unusual institution wasn't being established for the first time, but rather was being revived. The PPP advocated for legal protections and judicial oversight and entered negotiations about conditions of extension. The published study notes that the recommendations for PPPs were integrated with the project and that the project was a balance between security goals and constitutional protection (Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 401-2).

The Protection of Pakistan legislation is a useful contrast in the same broad policy area. If any provisions were deemed too sweeping, the PPP was more resistant and requested changes. As before, it suggests that "national security" was not equated with support. The design of the institutions was relevant. The pattern corresponds with the bargaining literature. Opposition support was accepted for protection or changes in conditions where the government required wider political support or opposition votes. The potential for cooperation through expected bargaining, as originated by Hohendorf, Saalfeld and Sieberer (2021, 921-27), is relevant.

Security thus seems to increase the political price tag of outright rejection, yet does not shed opposition concerns. Under these conditions, conditional cooperation is a reasonable and verifiable intermediate strategy.

Economic and Distributive Policy: Persistent Adversarial Opposition

One of the clearest differences between economic legislation and constitutional consensus emerges on taxation. Taxation is one of the areas where the differences between economic legislation and constitutional consensus are most striking. While financial reconciliation is taking place in a broader political sphere, opposition parties continued to challenge budgetary priorities, taxation, and government economic policies in Adil and Afridi's analysis of financial legislation during 2013-2018 (2021, 174-83).

The economic opposition of the PPP's political history predates the post-2008 period. It criticized the government's fiscal policies during 1991-1993 as unfair to salaried and lower-income groups, and questioned proposals for privatization. The project article documents opposition from the PPP to the Transfer of Managed Establishments legislation and concerns about lack of transparency and favouritism in privatisation. It also records criticism related to the policy of expenditure and revenue-expenditure imbalances (Saif, Zaman and Mushtaq 2025, 399-400).

The trend continued in 1997-1999. The PPP challenged federal fiscal policies, debt load, provincial resource allocation, as well as the economic impacts of government policies. It is important to note that the PPP had little parliamentary leverage due to the PML-N supermajority, but financial opposition to the PPP remained strong (Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq 2025, 400-401).

The post-2013 record is also significant because it shows that issue-based conflict persisted despite reconciliation. The PPP opposed the hike in the general sales tax, decried privatization, expressed concerns about the province's autonomy, objected to priorities for salaries and public spending, and joined in "cut" motions. The published article makes a clear distinction between this “unfriendly” financial function and the party's friendly-opposition image.

This evidence aligns with the idea that distributive and economic questions can reinforce or deepen partisan conflict, as they directly shape electoral competition and are generated by discernible costs, as argued by Moury and De Giorgi (2015, 4-8). Opposition parties can also use economic policy to claim credit for being the party of choice without risking regime change.

The issue-type argument is thus supported well by contrast, not by absolute regularity. However, the cooperation of the lower chamber that emerged from constitutional changes linked to common interest in institutional issues tended to be less than the opposition that arose in the lower chamber regarding budgetary and distributive matters, regardless of whether the prior cooperation or opposition existed in the upper chamber.

Regime Support without Government Support: The 2014 Dharna

The 2014 PTI-led protest movement is a boundary case as the focal point of concern was not any single bill of the government but the very survival of the elected government. The PPP continued to attack the PML-N as an opposition party. However, it opposed any efforts it thought could lead to a premature call on the government to resign under pressure from outside parliament. Based on the existing literature on the PPP response to the Dharna, there is a strategy to preserve parliamentary continuity while opposing government policies. This is of particular importance considering the 1990s. In the past, government opposition tended to mix the two, as opposition parties sought to win elections to facilitate a change in government. These objectives were increasingly split in the post-2008 environment.

The PPP's stance with respect to the destabilizing attempt in the Fourteenth National Assembly is described in its previously published article and is connected to broader politics of reconciliation (Saif, Zaman and Mushtaq 2025, 400-402). Similarly, Chawla and Ullah have paid special attention to the conservative and flexible nature of PPP pragmatism, instead of its abandonment of competition (2018, 1-14).

The Dharna case thus indicates a difference between three different objects of political opposition. These are: 1. Disagreement or dissent regarding an issue; 2. Opposition to the current government and keeping the same government in power by election; and opposition to strategies that might undermine the constitutional regime. The PPP might be very active in the first two but less active in the third. It provides a more precise understanding of what different post-2008 effective than “friendly opposition.”

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis: When and Why Did the PPP Cooperate?

The cases reveal substantial variation within the same party and, importantly, within the same parliamentary periods.

Table 1
A Tabulated Form of the Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Episode	Issue domain	PPP strategy	Democratic/ constitutional stakes	Bargaining leverage	Outcome
Twelfth Amendment, 1991	Civil liberties/judiciary	Adversarial	Perceived threat	Low	Government prevailed
Thirteenth Amendment, 1997	Democratic constitutional reform	Consensus support	Strongly positive	High political value	Passed
Fourteenth Amendment, 1997	Party discipline	Conditional cooperation	Positive but mixed	Relevant	Passed

Episode	Issue domain	PPP strategy	Democratic/ constitutional stakes	Bargaining leverage	Outcome
Ehtesab legislation, 1997	Accountability/executive power	Adversarial	Perceived partisan risk	Low	Government prevailed
Anti-Terrorism legislation, 1997	Security/civil liberties	Adversarial	Rights concerns	Low	Passed
Fifteenth Amendment, 1998	Executive/constitutional power	Adversarial	Perceived high threat	Senate constraint	Failed to complete enactment
Twenty-First Amendment, 2015	National security	Conditional cooperation	Mixed, crisis-driven	High	Passed
Twenty-Second Amendment, 2016	Electoral institutions	Cooperative/consensus	Positive	Relevant	Passed
Twenty-Third Amendment, 2017	National security	Conditional cooperation	Mixed	High	Passed with safeguards
Twenty-Fourth Amendment, 2017	Representation/elections	Conditional cooperation	Electoral continuity	High	Passed
Twenty-Fifth Amendment, 2018	Federal reform	Consensus support	Positive	High	Passed
Finance Bills, 2013-18	Economic/distributive	Mostly adversarial	Policy competition	Variable	Government generally prevailed
Dharna, 2014	Government/regime survival	Government opposition plus regime support	Very high	Political rather than legislative	Elected government continued

Several patterns emerge from this comparative analysis. First, the type of issue matters, but it is not crudely divided into constitutional/non-constitutional. Increases in electoral inclusion and decreases in authoritarian legacies were associated with cooperation. Constitutional provisions perceived as concentrating executive power or reducing checks promoted resistance. So, it was the substantive direction of constitutional change that was important.

Second, the rights/executive-power issues consistently produced antagonistic behaviour. The 12th and 15th Amendments, accountability mechanisms, and anti-terrorism provisions exhibit a common feature. The representatives of the PPP saw a danger that they could be used to expand coercive or executive power, at the cost of judicial, provincial, opposition, or civil-liberty protection.

Third, national-security crises gave rise to a distinct intermediate classification. The 21st and 23rd Amendments were not typical examples of consensus bills nor cases of unabated opposition. They supported their central goal, and they were asking for restrictions and protections in the PPP. These events are strong arguments in favor of separating the issue of consensus from that of conditional cooperation.

Fourth, conflicts over economic policy in otherwise peaceable political periods. In the early 1990s, late 1990s, and the PPF era (2013-2018), the PPP condemned fiscal policies adopted by the PML-N government. This temporal uniformity is significant because it constrains the level of explanation offered by the confrontation-to-reconciliation thesis. Inter-party relations were not uniform, however, and programmatic and distributive competition did not go away.

Fifth, bargaining power influenced the form cooperation occurred. The PPP had increased negotiating power due to constitutional amendments securing greater majorities. The opportunities to translate support into concessions were fewer in ordinary legislation under a large majority government. This is in line with previous institutional bargaining literature, which demonstrated that conflict power can create compromise, not just obstruction (Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2021, 921-27).

Sixth, the opposition's definition evolved with respect to the government's survival. Tuttnauer and Hazan demonstrate comparatively that institutional opportunities for the government to terminate influence the opposition actors' preference for conflict or policy influence (2024, 984-90). This is closely connected but contextually different logic, which is apparent from Pakistan's history. Despite multiple premature government dismissals, it was possible to achieve some level of collaboration on continuing the democratic process, while disagreeing with the substantive government policies.

The last one does not contradict but revises the current literature in Pakistan. The trend of moving from confrontation to reconciliation captured at the aggregate level by Saif, Zaman, and Mushtaq continues. What the issue-level comparison brings to the picture is that the change wasn't from opposition to acquiescence. It was a shift towards a more differentiated approach in which the Pakistan People's Party became more selective about what it challenged, how it challenged it, and if policy disagreements should be tied to the survival of the government.

Discussion: From Reconciliation to Conditional Opposition

The nature of the relationship between government and opposition has generally been categorized in the Pakistani literature as confrontation, constructive opposition, friendly opposition, reconciliation, or pragmatism. These categories reflect significant changes over time but mask substantial variation both within and across parliamentary terms.

The present comparison indicates that the concept of conditional opposition would more specifically account for that variation in conceptual language. What is considered conditional opposition can be defined as: A pattern of parliamentary conduct in which an opposition party's willingness to resist, negotiate, or cooperate with government depends on the nature of the proposal, its perceived implications for democratic constitutionalism, its policy congruence, bargaining power, and the likely outcomes of opposition in terms of government and regime stability.

The concept is based not against the comparative literature but in it. Van Well shows that opposition support is strategically shaped by policy, electoral, and office-seeking factors (2025, 895-903). Moury and De Giorgi highlight the pull of two factors: differentiation and cooperation (2015, 1-7). Both Garritzmann (2017, 1-6) and Wegmann (2022, 1-5) demonstrate the importance of institutional opportunity structures for opposition capacity; both Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer (2021, 921-27) and Garritzmann (2017, 1-6) show how institutional opportunity structures can stimulate negotiated cooperation. The authors Tuttnauer and Hazan argue that government termination incentives impact conflictual versus cooperative approaches (2024, 984-90).

The Pakistani case adds to these arguments by highlighting the fragility of democracy as an element of the strategic context. The frequent changeovers and terminations of elected governments shifted the nature of opposition strategy. Since 2008, the PPP has been able to challenge the incumbent without necessarily considering the removal of the government as an acceptable part of opposition.

This difference also prevents the confusion of "friendly opposition" that may arise when moral standards are considered. A party of opposition that allows for an elected government at the end of its term but vigorously opposes budgets, accountability systems, coercive legislation, or executive expansion is not analytically a friendly opposition party. Nor does opposition to democratic constitutional reform stem from the lack of cooperation. Both can be a strategic distinction between issues.

The article therefore revises the previous confrontation-to-reconciliation view in three ways. First, cooperation existed before the time of reconciliation. The Thirteenth Amendment is the most obvious one. The political atmosphere was hostile, but the cross-party interest in the Constitution created consensus. Second, there was some disagreement after reconciliation. Resistance to fiscal policy, accountability, and civil-

liberty issues persisted from 2013 to 2018. Third, the most significant post-2008 development was not just a decrease in conflict, but a distinct separation of policy contestation from regime contestation.

It has implications for research on opposition in new or fragile democracies beyond. Mature oppositions don't have to be less controversial when they're more developed. It could also be that disagreement becomes more selective: which institutional actors define questions, which competition is accepted, bargaining is possible, and the democratic framework can impose constraints on strategies to defeat the incumbent.

Conclusion

This article began with a broader question: why does an opposition party support one proposal of the government but reject the other? The Pakistan People's Party's experience in opposition suggests that party orientation alone does not adequately account for opposition behaviour, nor is it a historical shift from confrontation to cooperation.

When the PPP saw government proposals as compromising judicial independence, provincial autonomy, opposition rights, civil liberties, or its distributive and economic preferences, it adopted an adversarial opposition. This is shown in the case of the Twelfth Amendment, the Ehtesab legislation, anti-terror legislation, and the fiscal conflicts that have erupted repeatedly. It got close to consensus when government offers fit with its own constitutional/institutional preferences. The most obvious are the Thirteenth Amendment, electoral reforms, and the merger of FATA. However, where there was mutual interest in institutional change, electoral stability, or federal integration, partisan conflict took a back seat.

Between them, there was the possibility of "Conditional Cooperation". National-security laws, particularly the Twenty-First and Twenty-Third Amendments, established a context in which the PPP embraced a general notion of government intervention and was worried about military jurisdiction, constitutionalism, and rights protections. Reservations, negotiation and safeguards, or demands for limits were therefore included with support. It also appears from the evidence that opportunities for institutional negotiations were important. The government's need for opposition support, especially in regard to constitutional changes, made negotiated outcomes more likely. When governing majorities were able to act without opposition, they had fewer incentives or opportunities to turn cooperation into policy concessions.

Most significantly, the post-2008 shift does not seem to have eliminated oppositional politics. Instead, the PPP increasingly separated disagreement over policy and competition from the government and democratic governance. It is very telling that it did not view opposition to the PML-N government as an expression of support for early dissolution of that government in 2014.

In the case of Pakistan, this is only part of a broader concept of parliamentary opposition as a strategic and issue-oriented process. No one can be satisfied with the absence of conflict to conclude that an opposition is effective or that democracies are mature. Conflict is needed on many questions for Parliamentary democracy. What changes with institutionalization makes it harder for parties to distinguish between issues: to push back against policies they see as harmful, negotiate the acquisition of safeguards, and engage in cooperation over a more general constitutional/institutional goal.

The idea of conditional opposition offers a more fine-grained description of differential behaviour than a dichotomy of confrontation and reconciliation. It focuses on the characteristics of the issue, institutional opportunity, policy congruence, political incentives, and regime context in the explanation. It is best understood in that sense that the PPP evolved from 1990 to 2018, not away from opposition, but towards a more selective repertoire of opposition strategies.

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