Annual Methodological Archive Research Review

http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about Volume 3, Issue 5(2025)

The 18th Amendment and the Demise of Article 58(2) (B): Transforming Pakistan's Democratic Landscape

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Article Details

Keywords: 18th Amendment, Article 58(2 B), Parliamentary Sovereignty, Constitutional Reform, Democratic Consolidation

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ABSTRACT

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, passed in 2010, marked a critical juncture in the country's constitutional and political evolution. Among its most significant reforms was the repeal of Article 58(2) (B), which had empowered the President to unilaterally dissolve the National Assembly. This paper analyzes the historical context, political implications, and democratic impact of abolishing this controversial provision. By examining the amendment's role in strengthening parliamentary sovereignty, curbing presidential overreach, and fostering institutional balance, the study highlights how the 18th Amendment contributed to the consolidation of democratic norms in Pakistan. Furthermore, it evaluates the amendment's broader implications for civil-military relations and provincial autonomy, arguing that its enactment represents a decisive shift toward democratic resilience in Pakistan's tumultuous political landscape.

Introduction

Pakistan's political trajectory has been marked by oscillations between democratic governance and authoritarian rule. Central to this instability has been the imbalance of power between the executive, legislature, and military. One of the most contentious features of Pakistan's constitutional history was Article 58(2) (B), which granted the President discretionary powers to dissolve the National Assembly. Introduced through the eighth Amendment under General Zia-ul-Haq and reinstated by the 17th Amendment under General Pervez Musharraf, the article served as a tool for undermining elected governments.

The 18th Amendment, passed in 2010 during the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government, reversed this trend by repealing Article 58(2) (B), among many other reforms. This paper critically examines the implications of this repeal, arguing that it represented a landmark move toward democratic consolidation.

Historical Background of Article 58(2) (B)

Introduced through the eighth Amendment during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime.

Article 58(2)(b) was introduced into the Constitution of Pakistan through the 8th Amendment in 1985, during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. This controversial provision granted the President the discretionary authority to dissolve the National Assembly if, in his opinion, the government could not function in accordance with the Constitution. While framed as a safeguard against political instability, in practice it became a tool for authoritarian control, allowing the executive to undermine elected governments without due parliamentary process (abbas, 2021).

Presidents Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Farooq Leghari to dismiss democratically elected governments, contributing to a cycle of political uncertainty and weakening the institutional foundations of parliamentary democracy, invoked the clause several times in the 1990s. By centralizing power in the presidency, Article 58(2)(b) disrupted the constitutional balance and hindered the democratic evolution of Pakistan. Its eventual repeal through the 18th Amendment in 2010 was therefore seen as a pivotal step toward restoring parliamentary sovereignty and ensuring the continuity of democratic governance (Aslam, 2021).

As of 1988 to 1999, multiple civilian governments were dismissed under this article, contributing to political instability and weakening democratic institutions. After the 1997 general elections, the Nawaz Sharif-led government abolished this article through the 13th Amendment, only for it to be revived in 2003 under General Musharraf through the 17th Amendment.

Origins and Purpose

The genesis of Article 58(2) (B) can be traced to General Zia's efforts to legitimize his rule and institutionalize military dominance through constitutional means. The amendment came after the 1985 non-party general elections, held under Zia has controlled political environment. The newly elected National Assembly, largely subservient to the military regime, passed the eighth Amendment, which incorporated Article 58(2) (B) into the Constitution.

The article stated:

"Notwithstanding anything contained in clause (2), the President may also dissolve the National Assembly in his discretion where, in his opinion, a situation has arisen in which the Government of the Federation cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and an appeal to the electorate is necessary."

Impact on Civilian Governments

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The repeated use and eventual spirit of Article 58(2) (b), along with extraconstitutional interventions like the 1999 military coup, had a profoundly destabilizing impact on civilian governments in Pakistan. It created a political environment where elected leaders governed under constant threat of dismissal, eroding their authority and discouraging long-term policy planning. Successive dismissals on vague grounds such as corruption or misgovernance, often without due legal process, weakened democratic institutions and undermined public trust in electoral politics. Civilian governments became preoccupied with political survival rather than governance, while real power increasingly shifted toward the presidency and, more significantly, the military establishment. This imbalance curtailed the development of a robust parliamentary democracy, leading to cycles of political instability, weakened institutional checks and balances, and a fragile democratic culture that persists in Pakistan's political system to this day. Between 1988 and 1999, Article 58(2) (B) was used multiple times to dismiss democratically elected

Between 1988 and 1999, Article 58(2) (B) was used multiple times to dismiss democratically elected governments, creating a cycle of political instability and undermining public confidence in parliamentary democracy:

58 (2) B and dismiss of Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo's government

President Ghulam Ishaq Khan used it to dismiss Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo's government. In 1988, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan invoked Article 58(2) (b) of the Constitution to dismiss the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo's, marking a significant use of presidential powers to dissolve the National Assembly.

Article 58(2)(b) of the Constitution of Pakistan, inserted through the Eighth Amendment in 1985 under General Zia-ul-Haq, granted the President the discretionary power to dissolve the National Assembly if, in his opinion, the government could not be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. This article was first exercised in 1988 when President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo. Although Junejo had been appointed during Zia's regime, he gradually began asserting his authority and distancing himself from the military establishment. His independent stance, particularly the decision to initiate an inquiry into the Ojhri Camp disaster and efforts to assert parliamentary oversight, displeased the military elite. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan invoked Article 58(2)(b), citing inefficiency and a breakdown of governance, to dissolve the National Assembly and remove Junejo's from office. This event set a precedent for the use of Article 58(2)(b) as a political tool to dismiss elected governments, weakening democratic norms and reinforcing executive supremacy over parliamentary processes.

Dismiss of Benazir Bhutto's first government

Benazir Bhutto's first government was dismissed on corruption and misgovernance charges. "In 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's first government under Article 58(2) (b), citing allegations of corruption and misgovernance, a move that underscored the growing tensions between the executive and legislative branches.

The dismissal of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's first government in 1990 marked a critical moment in Pakistan's political history, showcasing the controversial use of Article 58(2)(b) of the Constitution. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan invoked this article to dissolve the National Assembly and remove Bhutto's government, citing allegations of widespread corruption, misgovernance, and deteriorating law and order. The charges, though never legally proven, were widely seen as politically motivated and reflective of the deep-rooted tensions between the civilian leadership and the establishment, including the presidency and the military. This dismissal, just 20 months into Bhutto's tenure, not only curtailed a democratically elected government but also reinforced the perception that civilian governments in Pakistan were vulnerable to arbitrary removal. The episode further entrenched the culture of executive overreach and hindered the development of a stable, uninterrupted democratic process in the country.

Nawaz Sharif's first government was dismissed

Nawaz Sharif's first government was dismissed, leading to a constitutional crisis and eventual resignation of both the President and Prime Minister after military mediation. In 1993, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan once again invoked Article 58(2) (b) to dismiss the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif,

citing issues of governance and growing political instability. However, this move sparked a severe constitutional crisis, as the Supreme Court later reinstated Nawaz Sharif's government, challenging the president's authority. The ensuing standoff between the presidency and the premiership led to a deadlock that paralyzed the state machinery. Ultimately, under pressure from the military establishment, both President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif were compelled to resign, highlighting the fragility of democratic institutions and the pervasive role of the military in Pakistan's political affairs.

Benazir Bhutto's second government.

In 1996, President Farooq Leghari dismissed Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's second government by invoking Article 58(2)(b), citing widespread corruption, deteriorating law and order, and economic mismanagement. This move was particularly significant as Leghari was a close ally of Bhutto and had been nominated by her party for the presidency. His decision underscored the growing disillusionment within the state apparatus regarding her administration's performance. The dismissal reflected the persistent instability in Pakistan's democratic setup, where presidential authority, often with the backing or influence of the military, frequently ousted elected governments and judiciary.

General Pervez Musharraf dismiss the Nawaz government

In 1999, although Article 58(2)(b) had been repealed by then, General Pervez Musharraf staged a military coup and ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, justifying his actions through the controversial "doctrine of necessity." While not a direct use of constitutional provision, the coup reflected the same underlying pattern of executive overreach and institutional imbalance that had characterized earlier dismissals under Article 58(2)(b). Musharraf's intervention underscored the military's dominant role in Pakistan's political landscape and the fragility of democratic governance in the face of entrenched authoritarian tendencies.

The frequent use of Article 58(2)(B) entrenched a "hybrid political order", where elected governments operated under the shadow of presidential (and military) discretion. It created an environment where prime ministers were constantly vulnerable to dismissal, discouraging long-term policy planning and institutional development.

ATTEMPTS AT REPEAL AND REVIVAL

13th Amendment (1997)

During Nawaz Sharif's second term, the Parliament repealed Article 58(2) (B) through the 13th Amendment, aiming to restore the parliamentary system. The 13th Amendment, passed in 1997 during Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's second term, marked a significant shift in Pakistan's constitutional and political framework. This amendment repealed Article 58(2) (b), thereby stripping the President of the discretionary power to dissolve the National Assembly. The move was intended to restore the balance of power in favor of the parliamentary system and strengthen democratic institutions by ensuring that elected governments could complete their constitutional terms without fear of arbitrary dismissal. It was a response to the political instability caused by the repeated use of Article 58(2) (b) to remove elected prime ministers throughout the 1980s and 1990s. By eliminating this controversial clause, the 13th Amendment sought to reinforce the supremacy of Parliament and limit presidential overreach, aiming to foster greater political continuity and institutional stability in Pakistan's fragile democracy.

17th Amendment (2003)

Under General Musharraf, the article was restored with minor modifications, re-empowering the President at the expense of Parliament. The 17th Amendment, enacted in 2003 under the military-led regime of General Pervez Musharraf, marked a significant reversal of earlier democratic gains. This amendment restored Article 58(2) (b) albeit with minor modifications—reinstating the President's power to dissolve the National Assembly. While it introduced some procedural checks, such as requiring Supreme Court validation for such actions, the amendment effectively tilted the balance of power back in favor of the presidency. This move was widely criticized as a step backward for parliamentary democracy, as it undermined the authority of the elected legislature and reinforced executive dominance, particularly under

a military ruler. The 17th Amendment reflected Musharraf's broader strategy of consolidating power through constitutional manipulation, weakening civilian institutions, and entrenching military influence in Pakistan's political system.

This back-and-forth legislative history underscores the political volatility and struggle for institutional supremacy in Pakistan's governance system.

Prelude to the 18th Amendment

By the end of General Musharraf's regime in 2008, there was widespread political consensus that the presidency had become too powerful. Civil society, opposition parties, and the legal community mobilized for constitutional restoration. This culminated in the passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010, which permanently repealed Article 58(2) (B) and reaffirmed the parliamentary character of the Constitution.

The 18th Amendment: Scope and Significance

The 18th Amendment, enacted on April 19, 2010, represented a comprehensive overhaul of the Constitution, amending more than 100 articles. Its key features included:

Repeal of Article 58(2) (B)

The Removing the presidential power to dissolve the National Assembly. The repeal of Article 58(2) (B) through the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010 was a landmark development in Pakistan's constitutional and political evolution. This article had long served as a mechanism for presidential interference in the democratic process by allowing the President to unilaterally dissolve the National Assembly if, in his subjective opinion, the government could no longer function in accordance with the Constitution (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973/2012). Its use throughout the late 1980s and 1990s led to the repeated dismissal of elected governments, thereby undermining political stability and parliamentary sovereignty (Rizvi, 2000). The 18th Amendment, passed with rare political consensus, removed this discretionary power, effectively transforming the President from an active political actor into a ceremonial head of state. This shift was critical in reasserting the authority of Parliament and the Prime Minister as the legitimate centers of executive power (Khan, 2014). By eliminating Article 58(2)(B), the amendment curtailed the potential for undemocratic regime changes and strengthened the principle that governments should only be removed through constitutional means, such as a vote of no confidence within the National Assembly (Newberg, 2013). The repeal also symbolized a broader rejection of the legacy of militarydominated constitutional engineering and marked a decisive step toward democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Revival of Parliamentary Sovereignty

Reinforcing the supremacy of Parliament in legislative and executive matters. One of the most transformative outcomes of the 18th Amendment was the restoration of parliamentary sovereignty, a principle severely compromised during decades of military and quasi-authoritarian rule in Pakistan. The amendment rebalanced the power structure by strengthening the role of Parliament and reducing the executive authority of the President, who had previously exercised disproportionate influence, particularly under Article 58(2)(B) (Khan, 2014). By abolishing this article, the 18th Amendment reinforced the foundational norm that the executive must derive its legitimacy from, and remain accountable to, the elected legislature. This shift reinstated the Parliament as the supreme legislative body and reestablished the Prime Minister as the chief executive, aligning the constitutional order more closely with the Westminster model (Waseem, 2012). Moreover, legislative authority over key policy areas, previously overshadowed by presidential decrees and military influence, was reclaimed by elected representatives, promoting greater transparency and responsiveness in governance (International Crisis Group, 2010). The amendment's emphasis on democratic decision-making processes and institutional checks contributed significantly to embedding the values of representative government and legal-rational authority in Pakistan is evolving democratic framework.

Restoration of the 1973 Constitution's Spirit

Reasserting the principles of federalism and parliamentary democracy. The 18th Constitutional Amendment

marked a decisive attempt to restore the original spirit of the 1973 Constitution, which was grounded in the ideals of federalism, parliamentary democracy, and provincial autonomy. Over the years, successive authoritarian regimes—particularly under Generals Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf had distorted the Constitution through various amendments, centralizing authority in the presidency and undermining the parliamentary system envisioned by the framers (Khan, 2014). The 18th Amendment reversed many of these distortions by transferring significant legislative and administrative powers from the center to the provinces, especially through the abolition of the Concurrent Legislative List (Waseem, 2010). This realignment empowered provincial governments to legislate and manage key sectors such as education, health, and culture, thereby reasserting the federal character of the state. Simultaneously, by limiting the President's discretionary powers and restoring the primacy of the Prime Minister and Parliament, the amendment reinstated parliamentary supremacy as the cornerstone of governance (International Crisis Group, 2010). In essence, the amendment reaffirmed the 1973 Constitution's vision of a democratic, federal republic where sovereignty is exercised through the elected representatives of the people, both at the national and provincial levels.

Devolution of Powers to Provinces:

Abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List and transferring several subjects to provincial legislatures.A cornerstone of the 18th Constitutional Amendment was the abolition of the Concurrent Legislative List, a significant reform that institutionalized the devolution of powers to Pakistan's provinces. The Concurrent List, which contained subjects that could be legislated upon by both the federal and provincial governments, had long been criticized for enabling central overreach into provincial domains, thereby undermining the federal spirit of the 1973 Constitution (Khan, 2014). By eliminating this list, the 18th Amendment transferred authority over 17 key subjects including education, health, environment, and culture, exclusively to the provinces, marking a critical step toward genuine provincial autonomy (Waseem, 2010). This decentralization was designed to bring governance closer to the people, enhance responsiveness to local needs, and reduce the bureaucratic bottlenecks associated with centralized decision-making (Niaz, 2019). Moreover, the creation of mechanisms such as the Council of Common Interests (CCI) as a strengthened forum for intergovernmental coordination further supported cooperative federalism (International Crisis Group, 2010). However, while the legal transfer of powers was a significant achievement, the provinces have faced challenges in institutional capacity and fiscal management, raising concerns about the effective implementation of devolved responsibilities (Cheema et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the devolution framework of the 18th Amendment remains a landmark in Pakistan's political development and federal restructuring.

Implications for Democratic Governance

Curtailment of Presidential Overreach

The elimination of Article 58(2) (B) restored the constitutional balance by reining in the powers of the presidency, which had been used as a vehicle for undemocratic regime changes. The President became a ceremonial figurehead, and executive authority was consolidated in the office of the Prime Minister.

Strengthening Parliamentary Supremacy

The amendment underscored the importance of parliamentary legitimacy. Governments could now only be removed through a vote of no confidence within the National Assembly, rather than through presidential fiat, making democratic institutions more resilient.

Stability in the Political System

By limiting the potential for arbitrary dismissals of governments, the 18th Amendment created an environment conducive to political continuity and policy consistency. Although challenges remain, elected governments have completed full terms since the amendment's passage, an unprecedented development in Pakistan's history.

Civil-Military Relations Post-18th Amendment

While the 18th Amendment symbolized civilian empowerment, it did not entirely diminish the military's

influence in national politics. The military continues to exert significant influence over foreign policy, national security, and internal affairs. However, the amendment reasserted the constitutional role of civilian institutions and provided a stronger framework for resisting extra-constitutional interventions.

Federalism and Provincial Autonomy

The 18th Amendment also had major implications for federalism in Pakistan. By abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List, it devolved greater autonomy to provinces in areas such as education, health, and local governance. This redistribution of power aimed to address long-standing grievances, particularly in smaller provinces, and promoted a more inclusive federal structure.

However, the implementation has been uneven, with provinces facing administrative and financial constraints. Nonetheless, the framework laid by the amendment serves as a foundation for a more robust federal system.

Challenges and Criticisms

Implementation Gaps

Despite its progressive provisions, the 18th Amendment has encountered implementation challenges. Bureaucratic inertia, political resistance, and lack of capacity at the provincial level have hampered the full realization of its goals.

Judicial Interpretations

There have also been concerns regarding judicial overreach in interpreting the amendment. While the judiciary has upheld most provisions, tensions occasionally arise over the balance between judicial review and parliamentary sovereignty.

Political Consensus

The amendment was initially a product of rare political consensus. However, changing political dynamics have led some parties to call for its review, raising fears of rollback or dilution of its democratic gains.

Conclusion

The repeal of Article 58(2) (B) through the 18th Amendment marked a watershed moment in Pakistan's journey toward democratic maturity. By abolishing a tool of authoritarianism, empowering Parliament, and promoting federalism, the amendment has significantly transformed the country's political landscape. While challenges persist in implementation and civil-military equilibrium, the amendment stands as a constitutional milestone that reinforces the principles of representative governance. For Pakistan's democracy to thrive, it is imperative that the spirit of the 18th Amendment is preserved, protected, and strengthened.

Article 58(2) (B) of the Constitution of Pakistan has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political trajectory, particularly by enabling the premature dismissal of elected governments. Introduced through the 8th Constitutional Amendment in 1985, during the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, the article allowed the President to dissolve the National Assembly if, in his opinion, "a situation has arisen in which the Government of the Federation cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution" (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973/2012).

The provision emerged from a context marked by civil-military imbalance and authoritarian consolidation. General Zia's efforts to institutionalize military dominance through constitutional means reflected an intent to preserve control over the political process even after restoring electoral procedures. By embedding this clause, the presidency was turned into a powerful institution capable of overriding parliamentary mandates. These dismissals weakened the democratic process and reinforced a pattern of executive dominance. Most of the removals were based on loosely defined allegations of corruption or inefficiency, rather than any definitive legal breach, thus rendering Article 58(2) (B) a tool of political manipulation.

In 1997, during Nawaz Sharif's second tenure, the 13th Constitutional Amendment successfully repealed Article 58(2) (B), signaling an attempt to restore parliamentary supremacy. However, following General Pervez Musharraf's military coup in 1999, the provision was reintroduced via the 17th Amendment in 2003, albeit with some procedural constraints (Newberg, 2013).Ultimately, the 18th Amendment of 2010 marked

the final repeal of Article 58(2)(B), restoring balance between state institutions and aiming to end the cycle of arbitrary executive dismissals. This repeal is widely regarded as a significant turning point in Pakistan's constitutional and democratic development.

Article 58(2)(b) of Pakistan's Constitution, which allowed the President to dissolve the National Assembly, was a major source of political instability, often used to dismiss elected governments. Initially introduced by the eighth Amendment in 1985, it was repealed by the 13th Amendment in 1997, reinstated with modifications by the 17th Amendment in 2003 under General Musharraf, and finally abolished through the 18th Amendment in April 2010. Its removal marked a significant step toward strengthening parliamentary democracy and curbing presidential overreach in Pakistan. Article 58(2) (b) was a controversial provision in Pakistan's Constitution that empowered the President to dissolve the National Assembly at his discretion, often undermining parliamentary democracy. Introduced through the eighth Amendment in 1985 under General Zia-ul-Haq, it became a tool for removing elected governments, as seen in the dismissals of Prime Ministers Muhammad Khan Junejo's, Benazir Bhutto (twice), and Nawaz Sharif. The 13th Amendment in 1997, during Nawaz Sharif's second term, repealed the article in an attempt to restore parliamentary supremacy. However, General Pervez Musharraf through the 17th Amendment in 2003, re-empowering the presidency, reinstated it with minor procedural checks. Ultimately, the 18th Amendment in April 2010 permanently removed Article 58(2)(b), signaling a major democratic reform. This amendment not only ended the president's power to dismiss elected governments but also promoted provincial autonomy and institutional balance, marking a crucial step in Pakistan's journey toward stable and representative governance.

Overall, the Article 58(2) (b), which had long been a tool for presidential overreach in Pakistan, was finally and permanently removed through the landmark 18th Amendment to the Constitution in April 2010. This amendment was part of a comprehensive constitutional reform package passed unanimously by Parliament under the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government, led by Prime Minister Youssef Raza Gillani and President Asif Ali Zardari. The repeal of Article 58(2)(b) was a historic step toward strengthening parliamentary democracy and restoring the original spirit of the 1973 Constitution. By abolishing the president's discretionary power to dissolve the National Assembly, the amendment ended decades of political instability caused by abrupt dismissals of elected governments. The 18th Amendment also devolved significant powers to the provinces and rebalanced the relationship between the executive, legislature, and judiciary. The removal of Article 58(2)(b) was widely hailed as a victory for democratic forces in Pakistan, symbolizing a shift away from authoritarian legacies and toward a more accountable and representative system of governance.

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