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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Pakistan Senate; opposition politics; parliamentary resistance; democratic governance; PPP; PML-N; Benazir Bhutto; Nawaz Sharif; federalism; 1993–1997	This study examines opposition politics, parliamentary resistance, and democratic governance in the Senate of Pakistan during 1993–1997. The period began with the return of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto as prime minister after the October 1993 general election and ended during the early phase of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML–N) government after the February 1997 election. The study focuses specifically on the Senate as a federal chamber and examines how opposition parties used parliamentary debate, questions, motions, legislative scrutiny, coalition-building, and constitutional contestation to challenge governments and articulate provincial and national interests. The research employs a qualitative historical method based on Senate proceedings, official parliamentary records, election data, constitutional documents, contemporary government reports, and scholarly literature. The evidence shows that the Senate offered an institutional arena in which opposition actors could continue political contestation even when the government possessed greater strength in the National Assembly. The March 1994 Senate elections were particularly important because they produced a closely balanced environment in which PPP, PML–N, and smaller parties could influence legislative bargaining. The 1997 Senate renewal altered the parliamentary balance and coincided with the emergence of a strong PML–N government. The study argues that parliamentary resistance during this period should be understood not simply as obstruction but as a combination of accountability, federal representation, legislative bargaining, and partisan competition. At the same time, the broader political environment marked by executive–presidential tensions, government opposition confrontation, provincial conflict, and early dissolution of elected governments limited the capacity of parliamentary institutions to consolidate stable democratic governance.
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Introduction

Pakistan's democratic experience during the 1990s was characterized by repeated changes of government, intense competition between the major political parties, and continuing constitutional tensions among the executive, presidency, parliament, judiciary, and provincial governments. The period 1993–1997 was particularly significant because it covered the second premiership of Benazir Bhutto, the dismissal of her government in November 1996, the February 1997 general election, and the initial consolidation of Nawaz Sharif's second government. These developments created a political environment in which opposition parties operated both inside and outside parliament. The Senate, as the upper chamber of Pakistan's bicameral legislature, provided a continuing institutional forum for federal representation and political scrutiny during this turbulent period (Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013; Talbot, 2003).

The constitutional rationale of the Senate was closely connected with federal balance. Unlike the National Assembly, whose representation is substantially population-based, the Senate was designed to provide equal representation to the federating units and to protect the interests of smaller provinces. The Senate therefore had a distinctive democratic function: it could moderate majoritarian pressures in the lower house and create an arena for negotiation among provinces and political parties. This institutional purpose made Senate opposition especially relevant to democratic governance because parliamentary resistance in the upper chamber could express concerns that were not necessarily reducible to national electoral majorities (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Khan, 2013).

The October 1993 general election produced a fragmented National Assembly. The PPP emerged with the largest number of seats, while the PML-N became the principal opposition force; smaller parties and independents were consequently important to government formation. Benazir Bhutto became prime minister after securing support beyond the PPP's own parliamentary strength. This coalition-dependent beginning meant that parliamentary negotiation was central to the government's survival. At the same time, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N retained a substantial parliamentary presence and continued to challenge the government politically. The institutional setting therefore encouraged both legislative bargaining and adversarial opposition (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 1993; U.S. Department of State, 1997).

This article asks four questions: first, what political and institutional conditions shaped Senate opposition politics between 1993 and 1997; second, what parliamentary mechanisms were available to opposition parties; third, how did party competition and federal representation affect legislative resistance; and fourth, what did these patterns mean for democratic governance? The central argument is that Senate opposition during this period served several functions simultaneously: holding the executive to account, representing provincial interests, negotiating legislation, and maintaining partisan competition. However, the wider instability of Pakistan's democratic institutions reduced the extent to which parliamentary resistance could develop into sustained institutionalized opposition (Shafqat, 1996; Ziring, 1997).

Research Objectives

- To examine the institutional and political context of Senate opposition politics in Pakistan from 1993 to 1997.
- To identify the principal parliamentary strategies through which opposition parties challenged government policy.
- To assess the role of the Senate in federal representation, legislative scrutiny, and democratic accountability.

Research Questions

How did political competition between the PPP and PML-N shape opposition politics in the Senate between 1993 and 1997?

What parliamentary mechanisms were used by opposition senators to scrutinize and challenge government policy?

How did the Senate's federal character influence opposition arguments and legislative bargaining?

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative historical and documentary research design. Primary materials include official Senate debates, parliamentary session records, election summaries, constitutional materials, and government documents. Secondary materials include books, journal articles, and scholarly studies dealing with Pakistan's democratic politics, constitutional development, Benazir Bhutto's government, and government-opposition relations. The period 1993–1997 was selected because it captures the transition from the 1993 election and the formation of the second Bhutto government through the 1994 Senate renewal and the 1997 change of government. Documentary evidence is interpreted comparatively rather than through statistical hypothesis testing, with particular attention to institutional roles, party strategies, and constitutional developments.

The analysis treats parliamentary resistance as a broad concept covering formal debate, questioning, motions, criticism of legislation, coalition-building, procedural interventions, and public articulation of federal or policy concerns through parliamentary institutions. This approach is appropriate because opposition in a parliamentary system is not limited to voting against the government; it can also involve scrutiny, amendment, negotiation, and the presentation of alternative policy positions. The interpretation is therefore grounded in institutional records and historical scholarship rather than assuming that every disagreement between parties represented democratic accountability or, conversely, that every obstruction was anti-democratic.

Literature Review

Opposition Politics and Democratic Contestation

The first body of literature relevant to this study concerns opposition politics in Pakistan's democratic transitions. Research on the late 1980s and early 1990s shows that opposition parties frequently combined parliamentary activity with extra-parliamentary mobilization. The opposition was expected to scrutinize executive action, but party competition was also shaped by institutional weaknesses, presidential powers, provincial conflicts, and distrust between major political actors. Recent scholarship on Benazir Bhutto's earlier period as opposition leader demonstrates that her political strategy included both parliamentary engagement and confrontation outside parliament, illustrating the broader tension between institutional opposition and mobilizational politics in Pakistan's democratic system (Shahzadi & Kiran, 2026a, 2026b).

Saeed Shafqat's study of the second Bhutto government provides an important contemporary scholarly account of the political environment from 1993 to 1996. Shafqat emphasizes the interaction between political leadership, institutions, economic policy, provincial politics, and the opposition. His analysis helps explain why government–opposition relations became central to the functioning of Pakistan's democratic system during this period. Rather than viewing opposition merely as an electoral alternative, the study shows that opposition politics was embedded in a wider struggle over the distribution of political authority among parliament, presidency, provinces, and political parties (Shafqat, 1996).

Rehman, Khan, and Khan's work on government–opposition relations during Benazir Bhutto's rule similarly emphasizes the confrontational character of political relations at the centre and between federal and provincial governments. Their analysis suggests that weak institutional trust and partisan rivalry affected the capacity of elected institutions to cooperate. This literature is useful for the present study because Senate resistance cannot be understood in isolation from the wider political relationship between the governing PPP and opposition forces, especially the PML-N (Rehman et al., 2025).

The literature also indicates that Pakistan's opposition politics was shaped by constitutional arrangements that gave the presidency substantial authority during the 1990s. Article 58(2)(b), associated with the Eighth Amendment framework, permitted presidential dissolution of the National Assembly under specified constitutional conditions. This institutional arrangement affected the incentives of political parties because governments could face threats beyond ordinary parliamentary confidence votes. Consequently, opposition politics operated within a political system in which parliamentary contestation was intertwined with presidential power and broader institutional competition (Khan, 2013; Ziring, 1997).

Senate, Federalism, and Parliamentary Governance

The second body of literature concerns the institutional role of the Senate. The Senate was created under the 1973 Constitution as a permanent federal chamber intended to provide equal representation to the provinces. Its institutional logic differs from that of the National Assembly because the Senate is not designed simply to reproduce population-based electoral majorities. Instead, it provides a mechanism through which provincial units participate in federal lawmaking and political debate. This makes the Senate particularly relevant to the study of parliamentary resistance because opposition senators may represent both partisan and territorial interests (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Khan, 2013).

The Senate's permanent character also gives it a distinctive relationship with democratic continuity. Although the National Assembly can be dissolved, the Senate is constitutionally structured as a continuing chamber, with members serving staggered terms. This design can create institutional memory and allow political representation to persist through changes in government. During the 1993–1997 period, therefore, the Senate provided a parliamentary arena in which political competition continued even as governments changed at the national level (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013).

The March 1994 Senate elections are especially important for understanding this institutional balance. Contemporary election reporting indicates that the PPP won 16 of the seats contested, the PML-N won six, and several smaller parties secured representation. Following the election, the PPP had 22 seats and the PML-N had 20, with smaller parties and alliances affecting the effective balance of power. This pattern illustrates how the Senate could not be reduced to a simple government-versus-opposition binary: smaller and regional parties could become important parliamentary actors and could influence legislative bargaining (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995).

The 1997 Senate election produced another significant shift. The Inter-Parliamentary Union recorded 44 seats being renewed on 12 March 1997, with the PML-N securing 27 seats and the PPP 19 among the reported party distributions, alongside representation for ANP, MQM-related groups, Jamhuri Watan Party, Balochistan National Party, JUI-F, and others. The election occurred shortly after the PML-N's major victory in the February 1997 National Assembly election and therefore contributed to a new parliamentary configuration (IPU, 1997).

Taken together, this literature suggests that Senate politics should be studied through the combined lenses of federalism, party competition, legislative oversight, and democratic continuity. The existing scholarship often concentrates on prime ministers, presidents, National Assembly politics, or military–civil relations. A more Senate-centred approach can add value by examining how opposition parties used an upper chamber with a distinct constitutional purpose. This study therefore connects the literature on Pakistan's democratic instability with the institutional study of the Senate (Khan, 2013; Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013).

Political Context of 1993–1997

The period under study began in the aftermath of the political crisis of 1993, when President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif both left office following a prolonged institutional confrontation. The National Assembly had earlier been dissolved and subsequently restored by the Supreme Court before the political crisis culminated in the resignations of the president and prime minister. A caretaker government headed by Moeen Qureshi then organized the October 1993 elections. These events demonstrated the fragility of parliamentary government and established the institutional context in which the next government would operate (National Assembly of Pakistan, n.d.; IPU, 1993).

The October 1993 election did not give the PPP an outright majority in the National Assembly. IPU data show the PPP with 86 directly elected seats and the PML-N with 72, while smaller parties and independents occupied the remaining seats. Benazir Bhutto became prime minister after obtaining additional support from minor parties and independents. The resulting government therefore depended on coalition management and parliamentary bargaining rather than an uncomplicated single-party majority (IPU, 1993).

This political structure had implications for the Senate. The opposition was led by a large and organized PML-N, while regional and smaller parties could influence parliamentary outcomes. Because the Senate's composition did not simply mirror the National Assembly's election result, the upper chamber created a separate arena for legislative contestation. Opposition parties could therefore use the Senate to question policy, highlight provincial issues, and negotiate over legislation even when the government had greater strength in the lower house (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Shafqat, 1996).

Parliamentary Resistance in the Senate

Parliamentary resistance in the Senate during 1993–1997 can be understood first as legislative scrutiny. Senate debates provided an institutional setting in which opposition senators could question government policy and demand explanations. The Senate's official records preserve sessions from the 1993–1994, 1995–1996, and 1996–1997 parliamentary years, demonstrating the continuity of parliamentary activity across the period. Such records are important because they allow opposition politics to be examined as a parliamentary practice rather than solely through public rallies, newspaper statements, or electoral campaigns (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.).

A second form of resistance involved policy criticism. Opposition senators could challenge government approaches to economic management, administration, security, provincial affairs, and constitutional questions. This form of opposition was significant because the PPP government faced broader criticism over economic and administrative performance, while the PML-N sought to maintain pressure on the government. Contemporary scholarship on the Bhutto government identifies economic management, political confrontation, and institutional conflict as important dimensions of the period (Shafqat, 1996).

A third form of resistance was coalition-building. The 1994 Senate results illustrate why alliances with smaller parties were important. The PPP did not operate in a political vacuum, and the PML-N likewise required relationships with regional and smaller parties to strengthen its parliamentary position. Such bargaining could support or obstruct legislation depending on the issue. Coalition-building therefore demonstrates that opposition politics was not merely a two-party confrontation; it was also a process of negotiation among multiple parties representing different provincial, ideological, and political interests (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995).

A fourth form of parliamentary resistance concerned constitutional governance. During the 1990s, political parties repeatedly debated the distribution of power between the president and prime minister. The constitutional framework gave the presidency significant leverage over elected governments, and this contributed to political uncertainty. Opposition parties could therefore frame constitutional questions as issues of parliamentary supremacy, executive accountability, and democratic continuity. The later passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1997, which removed the president's power under Article 58(2)(b) to dissolve the National Assembly in the manner associated with the earlier framework, represented a major constitutional shift in the distribution of executive authority (Khan, 2013; U.S. Department of State, 1997).

The 1994 Senate Elections and the Balance of Opposition

The March 1994 Senate elections were a turning point in the parliamentary balance. Contemporary reporting states that the PPP won 16 of the seats contested, the PML-N won six, ANP won three, and several other parties won smaller numbers. After the election, the PPP's Senate representation reached 22 while the PML-N had 20, with additional support coming from smaller parties. The resulting configuration meant that the governing party had an important bloc but that opposition and regional parties retained substantial bargaining capacity (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995).

The significance of the 1994 result was not simply numerical. It reflected the federal and staggered character of the Senate. Unlike a general election in which a single nationwide campaign can transform the National Assembly at one moment, Senate elections renew only a portion of the chamber. This institutional design can moderate sudden partisan swings and preserve continuity. During a period of frequent governmental crisis, such continuity gave senators an opportunity to maintain parliamentary work while the political environment outside the chamber remained unstable (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Khan, 2013).

The 1994 configuration also demonstrates the importance of smaller parties. ANP, PML-J, MQM-related representation, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and other regional actors could affect the balance between larger parties. From the perspective of democratic governance, this pluralism created opportunities for provincial interests to enter federal legislative debate. From the perspective of

party competition, however, it also meant that parliamentary alliances could be fluid and issue-specific (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995; Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013).

Government–Opposition Relations and Democratic Governance

The relationship between government and opposition during Benazir Bhutto's second term was marked by persistent political confrontation. The PML–N remained the major opposition party and criticized the government on economic, administrative, and political grounds. Scholarship on the period identifies the difficult relationship between central government and opposition, as well as conflicts involving provincial governments, as important factors affecting democratic governance. These tensions reduced the space for stable bipartisan cooperation and contributed to a political culture in which electoral competition frequently extended into institutional conflict (Rehman et al., 2025; Shafqat, 1996).

The Senate nevertheless provided a constitutional channel through which opposition could remain within the parliamentary system. Parliamentary resistance can contribute to democratic governance when it exposes weaknesses in public policy, requires ministers to respond to questions, and offers alternative viewpoints without undermining the legitimacy of constitutional institutions. In this sense, opposition is not inherently a threat to governance; rather, the quality of democratic governance depends partly on whether government and opposition can transform disagreement into institutional debate and negotiation (Khan, 2013; Senate of Pakistan, n.d.).

At the same time, the historical record indicates that parliamentary politics did not eliminate extra-parliamentary conflict. Opposition politics in Pakistan during the broader period frequently moved between legislative forums and public mobilization. Research on Benazir Bhutto's earlier opposition period shows this dual strategy clearly, while studies of the 1993–1996 government emphasize the persistence of confrontation between the PPP and PML–N. The result was a democratic system in which formal institutions existed but political actors did not always rely exclusively on them to resolve disputes (Shahzadi & Kiran, 2026a; Rehman et al., 2025).

The 1996 Dismissal and Its Impact on Parliamentary Politics

The dismissal of the Bhutto government in November 1996 marked a major interruption in the parliamentary period under study. President Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari dismissed the government and cited allegations including corruption, economic mismanagement, and involvement in extrajudicial killings. These were presidentially stated grounds and should be distinguished from independently established findings. The dismissal demonstrated that executive–presidential conflict remained a central constraint on parliamentary government in the 1990s (U.S. Department of State, 1997).

The dismissal also affected the meaning of opposition politics. When an elected government can be removed through constitutional mechanisms involving the presidency, opposition parties have incentives to pursue institutional as well as political strategies. The Senate's continuing existence

as a federal chamber provided institutional continuity, but the broader parliamentary system remained dependent on constitutional relationships among the president, prime minister, National Assembly, Senate, judiciary, and political parties (Khan, 2013; Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013).

The 1997 Elections and the New Parliamentary Configuration

The February 1997 general election transformed the political environment. The PML-N secured an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly and Nawaz Sharif became prime minister. The National Assembly's official historical record identifies 3 February 1997 as the election date and 17 February as the date on which Sharif took office as prime minister. The change from a coalition-dependent PPP government to a government with a very large PML-N majority significantly altered the balance between government and opposition in the lower house (National Assembly of Pakistan, n.d.).

The Senate election held on 12 March 1997 further changed the parliamentary configuration. According to the IPU, 44 Senate seats were renewed and the PML-N won 27 seats while the PPP won 19, alongside seats associated with ANP, MQM-related groups, JWP, BNP, JUI-F, and other groups. The result strengthened PML-N representation in the upper chamber and created a new environment for parliamentary governance after the February general election (IPU, 1997).

The new government soon pursued constitutional change. In March 1997, Parliament passed an amendment that removed the president's power to dissolve Parliament under the relevant constitutional provision and altered the constitutional relationship between the prime minister and the president in several areas. Contemporary U.S. government reporting described the amendment as a significant strengthening of the prime minister's authority. The development illustrates how constitutional reform itself became a major arena of parliamentary politics and how the balance between government and opposition could shape institutional change (U.S. Department of State, 1997).

Senate Opposition and Federal Representation

The Senate's federal character is essential for interpreting opposition politics in this period. Because each province receives equal representation in the Senate under the constitutional design, senators can raise issues that may not correspond directly to population-based representation. This includes provincial autonomy, resource distribution, administrative grievances, and regional development. The chamber therefore provides a link between partisan opposition and territorial representation (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.).

Regional parties were important participants in the Senate's political environment. The 1997 distribution, for example, included ANP, JWP, BNP, MQM-related representation, and JUI-F in addition to PPP and PML-N. Such pluralism meant that parliamentary debate could not be reduced to a simple government-opposition binary. Regional parties could cooperate with a

major party on one issue while opposing it on another, creating a bargaining environment characteristic of federal parliamentary politics (IPU, 1997).

This federal dimension also affected democratic governance because opposition could perform a representational function beyond challenging the prime minister. A senator might criticize a government policy because it affected a province, a region, or a sector of society, while simultaneously belonging to an opposition party. The Senate thus provided an institutional space in which democratic accountability and federal representation could overlap (Senate of Pakistan, n.d.; Khan, 2013).

Discussion

The evidence indicates that opposition politics in the Senate from 1993 to 1997 had three interconnected dimensions. First, it was partisan: PPP and PML-N competed for influence and used parliamentary institutions to advance competing political narratives. Second, it was institutional: senators participated in debates, scrutiny, legislative bargaining, and constitutional discussion. Third, it was federal: the Senate's composition enabled provincial and regional interests to shape national parliamentary politics. These dimensions explain why Senate opposition should not be understood solely as resistance to the government; it was also part of the routine functioning of a federal legislature (Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013; Senate of Pakistan, n.d.).

The study also finds that the effectiveness of parliamentary resistance depended on the broader institutional environment. Where parties accepted parliamentary procedures as the primary arena for resolving disagreement, opposition could strengthen accountability. Where political conflict shifted toward presidential intervention, mass mobilization, or institutional confrontation, parliamentary mechanisms were less able to stabilize the democratic system. The experience of 1993–1997 therefore illustrates both the potential and the limitations of parliamentary opposition in a transitional democracy (Shafqat, 1996; Ziring, 1997).

The 1994 and 1997 Senate elections demonstrate the importance of institutional continuity. The 1994 election produced a competitive balance in which PPP and PML-N both possessed substantial representation and smaller parties could influence alliances. The 1997 election, occurring after a major PML-N victory in the National Assembly, produced a stronger PML-N position in the Senate. These changes show how electoral cycles and staggered Senate membership affected the institutional distribution of political power (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995; IPU, 1997).

Finally, the period demonstrates that democratic governance requires more than the existence of elections and parliamentary chambers. It also depends on relationships among political parties, constitutional institutions, provinces, and elected executives. The Senate provided a formal mechanism for representation and resistance, but its contribution to democratic consolidation was constrained by the wider political conflicts of the 1990s. The historical lesson is therefore institutional rather than partisan: parliamentary opposition can contribute to accountability

when political competition remains connected to constitutional procedures and negotiated legislative practice (Khan, 2013; Belokrenitsky & Moskalenko, 2013).

Conclusion

Opposition politics in Pakistan's Senate between 1993 and 1997 developed within a highly competitive and institutionally uncertain democratic environment. The second Bhutto government began without an outright National Assembly majority, making coalition-building and parliamentary negotiation important. The 1994 Senate elections created a competitive upper-chamber balance involving PPP, PML-N, and smaller parties. The dismissal of the Bhutto government in 1996 and the subsequent PML-N victory in 1997 then produced a new political configuration, reinforced by the March 1997 Senate elections.

The study concludes that the Senate served as an important arena for parliamentary resistance, federal representation, and democratic accountability during this period. Opposition senators could scrutinize government policies, participate in legislative debate, negotiate with other parties, and raise provincial concerns. However, the broader political system was affected by executive-presidential conflict, party polarization, provincial disputes, and the instability of elected governments. Consequently, the Senate's institutional potential was significant but could not by itself overcome structural weaknesses in Pakistan's democratic governance.

The period 1993–1997 therefore deserves greater attention in the study of Pakistan's parliamentary history because it reveals how an upper chamber can function during a period of democratic transition and political instability. Future research can deepen this analysis through systematic content analysis of Senate debates, questions, resolutions, and legislative records for individual parliamentary sessions. Such research could identify the frequency of opposition interventions, policy areas most frequently contested, and the extent to which opposition proposals resulted in amendments, government responses, or negotiated outcomes.

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