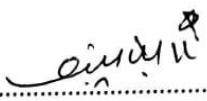


### **Certificate of Approval**

It is certified that we have read this thesis entitled "**Editorial Coverage of The General Election Delay in Pakistan: Exploring the Predominant Themes**" submitted by Saleh Safeer Abbasi. It is our judgment that this thesis is of sufficient standard to warrant its acceptance by the International Islamic University Islamabad for the award of MS Degree in Media and Communication studies.

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**MS THESIS**

**EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF THE GENERAL ELECTION  
DELAY IN PAKISTAN: EXPLORING THE PREDOMINANT  
THEMES**



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# **EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF THE GENERAL ELECTION IN PAKISTAN: EXPLORING THE PREDOMINANT THEMES**



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*This thesis is submitted to the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, International Islamic University, Islamabad to full fill the requirements for degree of MS (Media and Communication Studies).*

**DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD**

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### **Committee**

## **Declaration**

I, Saleh Safeer Abbasi hereby certify that this work, which I now submit for assessment for the program of study leading to the award of MS entitled “ Editorial Coverage of The General Election Delay in Pakistan: Exploring The Predominant Themes” is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copy right, and has been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the critical period following the constitutionally mandated 90day deadline for holding general elections specifically, from April 20, 2023, and November 11, 2023, a time marked by political uncertainty and legal ambiguity. Despite clear instructions from the Supreme Court of Pakistan, elections were not conducted within the stipulated timeframe, raising significant constitutional, democratic, and institutional questions.

This research investigates how four leading English language newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* framed and editorialized the election delay. These newspapers were selected based on their wide readership, editorial influence, and relevance in shaping public discourse in Pakistan. It focuses on how these newspapers have been carrying out the agenda setting and watchdog functions, especially after such a time in constitutional tension and democratic abrasion.

A qualitative thematic analysis approach has been adopted in answering this question. The collection of editorials was done systematically, and the clean-up of the data review took place by adhering to the strict review of the data. The selection of relevant editorials in each of the newspapers was done using a systematic method of sampling (Kth interval). Such editorials were subsequently coded and grouped into key thematic categories because of similar patterns, dominating frames, and practices of discourse.

***Keywords:***

Constitutional Crisis, Editorial Analysis, Election Delay, Media Framing, Political, Public Trust, Supreme Court of Pakistan.

# CHAPTER 01

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In the aftermath of a deepening political crisis, Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI), the then ruling party, announced its decision to resign from *The National Assembly* of Pakistan and subsequently dissolved the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provincial assemblies. The Punjab Assembly was dissolved on January 14, 2023, and the KP Assembly followed on January 18, 2023, after formal resignations from the respective Chief Ministers and subsequent acceptance by the Governors (*Dawn*, 2023a).

The political unrest was further complicated by the prior resignation of PTI's members from *The National Assembly* following the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan via a no confidence vote in April 2022. *The National Assembly* had initially accepted these resignations en masse. However, the Supreme Court of Pakistan intervened and overturned this decision, stating that resignations must be verified individually to be constitutionally valid (*The Express Tribune*, 2022). Consequently, an election for a new Prime Minister was held in *The National Assembly*. As a result, Mian Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif, President of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and nominee of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) a coalition of 13 political parties was elected as the 23rd Prime Minister of Pakistan. He served for approximately 16 months, from April 2022 until August 2023, when *The National Assembly* was eventually dissolved on schedule (*The Nation*, 2023).

According to Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973), elections must be held within 90 days of the dissolution of a provincial or national assembly:

*"When The National Assembly or a Provincial Assembly is dissolved, a general election shall be held within a period of ninety days after the dissolution." (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 224(2))*

Therefore, following the dissolution of the Punjab Assembly on January 14, 2023, and the KP Assembly on January 18, 2023, elections were constitutionally required to be held by Mid-April 2023. However, both caretaker governments in Punjab and KP appointed under Article 224A were widely criticized for their lack of seriousness and commitment to fulfilling this constitutional mandate. In parallel, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), which is responsible for ensuring free and fair elections under Article 218, was seen as inactive and hesitant, citing logistical and security concerns (ECP, 2023).

Amid growing concerns over democratic backsliding and institutional inaction, Justice Umar Ata Bandial, the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, took *Suo motu* notice of the election delay. He summoned representatives from the ECP and political parties to the Supreme Court to explain the delay in conducting elections within the stipulated 90-day period. During multiple hearings in March and April 2023, the ECP presented reasons such as lack of funding, security threats, and administrative challenges, but failed to provide compelling justification. The Supreme Court, in its judgment dated April 4, 2023, declared that elections in Punjab must be held by May 14, 2023, and directed the ECP to comply accordingly (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2023).

Despite this unequivocal ruling from the apex court, the elections in Punjab were not conducted on the ordered date. Political parties aligned with the PDM coalition continued to argue for delayed elections based on fiscal constraints and the need for simultaneous polls at the provincial and national levels. The ECP, under political pressure and lacking logistical support, postponed the elections indefinitely, in direct violation of the Supreme Court's orders escalating the constitutional crisis and further eroding public trust in democratic institutions (*The News International*, 2023).

This unprecedented situation raised serious questions about the independence of constitutional bodies, political consensus, and rule of law in Pakistan. It also served as the core rationale for the current research, which aims to examine how mainstream print media editorialized and framed this democratic impasse.

### **1.1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The timely conduct of elections is a cornerstone of any functioning democracy, and Pakistan's constitutional framework clearly defines the limits within which elections must be held. According to Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973), when a provincial or national assembly is dissolved, elections must be conducted within 90 days of the dissolution (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). However, in 2023, Pakistan faced a significant constitutional and political crisis when the general elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) both dissolved in January were not held within the mandated 90-day period. Similarly, the delay in announcing and executing federal elections further exacerbated the situation. This unprecedented electoral delay occurred despite clear and binding instructions from the Supreme Court of Pakistan, which had ordered the Election Commission to hold elections by May 14, 2023 (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2023).

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, yet in Pakistan they have often been subject to postponements, legal ambiguities, and political contestation. While scholars have widely studied media coverage of elections, political bias, and institutional crises, limited attention has been given to how editorial pages frame the issue of election delays a matter that directly challenges constitutional continuity and democratic accountability. Editorials are significant because they reflect the institutional stance of newspapers and influence elite as well as public discourse. The absence of systematic analysis of editorial framing around election delays represents a key research gap. This study addresses that gap by investigating

how leading Pakistani newspapers framed the 2023 election delays, what dominant narratives emerged, and what implications these discourses carry for democratic norms in Pakistan.

The central problem this research addresses is how the editorial pages of mainstream Pakistani English language newspapers represented and responded to this election delay. The study focuses on the editorial content of four prominent national dailies *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* over a specific period: after 90 days after the constitutional 90day deadline, i.e., from November 11 to December 11, 2023. The research aims to explore how these editorial voices framed the constitutional violations, critiqued political decision making, and engaged with the judiciary's stance regarding delayed elections at both provincial and federal levels.

This election delay was not merely an administrative lapse but had significant political and economic repercussions. The uncertainty surrounding electoral processes contributed to governance instability, deteriorated investor confidence, and eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Thus, understanding how the editorial pages a key form of opinion making and agenda setting in media narrated and critiqued these developments is crucial. Editorials often reflect the ideological leanings of a newspaper and serve as a discursive site where institutional positions, elite consensus, and public interest converge (McNair, 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Therefore, this research seeks to address the following fundamental issue: How did the editorial pages of leading English language newspapers in Pakistan construct and convey thematic narratives surrounding the delay of elections at provincial and federal levels during the after 90 days period following the constitutional 90-days deadline?

### **1.1.2 Significance of Study:**

This study examining the election delay in Pakistan during the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government holds considerable significance both academically and practically. It contributes to the broader fields of political communication, media studies, and comparative democratic governance by analysing how media discourse shapes, reflects, and constructs public understanding during moments of political crisis.

### **Contribution to Political and Democratic Discourse**

At the core of the research is the constitutional and democratic crisis that emerged when elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were not held within the 90day constitutional mandate following the dissolution of their assemblies. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) cited various logistical, financial, and security concerns as justification for the delay (ECP, 2023). This study takes a critical look at such justifications by focusing on editorial accounts in the major English language daily newspapers.

This paper can help us understand the interaction between media institutions, legal, political, and administrative structures under circumstances of constitutional clashes, through analysing the response of the following editorial media Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International to these events. It throws light on the media in terms of institutional accountability or destruction of political narratives hence influencing the opinion of the mass or the elites. This is quite important, particularly in Pakistan where the democratic standards are not always strong and media is both a watchman and player of the political discussions (Rizvi, 2019; Ahmed & Khan, 2021).

### **Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception**

This research paper examines the relevance of the priming theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) to editorial discourse and how it was used by the newspapers to bring out certain themes

of the election delay as constitutionalism, political manipulation, judicial activism or democratic erosion to provoke the appropriate cognitive frames in which the readers perceived the news. Unlike news, editorials denote the official position of the publication and, therefore, serve as the tools of ideological positioning (McNair, 2017). The study of their themes gives us a glimpse of hegemonic discourses and media agenda setting under a controversial process of politics.

This is especially true when it comes to the Pakistani scenario where the freedom of the media is challenged and newspapers tend to reflect the partisan tendencies or employment of an institution (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Hence, understanding the framing of election delays can provide a lens into broader political alignments and the role of media in democratic backsliding.

### **Implications for Policy, Academia, and Media Literacy**

Scholars of political science and media studies, by enriching theoretical discussions on democratic crises, constitutionalism, and media framing in developing democracies. Policymakers and electoral bodies, by highlighting the institutional weaknesses and media pressures involved in managing elections. Civil society and media literacy advocates, by illustrating how public perception is shaped during democratic controversies and how editorial media can either promote transparency or complicity.

### **Filling a Gap in Existing Research**

While there is considerable academic focus on electoral politics in Pakistan, little work has been done on the editorial media's framing of election delays, especially in the specific post90day period mandated by the Constitution. By focusing on a after 90 days window after this deadline, this study provides focused, timely, and original insights into editorial responses to a constitutional breach.

## **1.4 Objective of Research:**

To explore and critically analyse the editorial coverage related to the delay of elections in the selected Pakistani newspapers following the expiration of the constitutionally mandated 90day period.

To identify and interpret the predominant themes reflected in the editorial content of *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* during the specified period of 20 April 2023 and November 11, 2023.

## **1.5 Research Question**

What are the predominant themes produced by dailies *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *The News International* regarding the election delay in Pakistan at provincial and federal level. during the time period under study.

## **1.6 Delimitation of Study**

The delimitations of a research study help clarify its boundaries, focus, and scope. This study is specifically delimited to editorial content published in four major English language newspapers in Pakistan *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* during a defined time frame and in response to a specific political and constitutional event: the delay in holding elections at the provincial and federal levels beyond the constitutionally mandated 90day period, as outlined in Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973).

### ***Focus on Editorials Only***

This research is limited to the editorial sections of the selected newspapers. Editorials represent the official voice and institutional opinion of a newspaper and are considered crucial in shaping public discourse and political opinion (McNair, 2017). Other forms of content such as news reports, op-eds, opinion columns, letters to the editor, and feature stories are excluded from this study to maintain analytical precision and consistency in data type.

### ***Specific Newspapers***

*Dawn*  
*The Express Tribune*  
*The Nation*  
*The News International*

These newspapers were selected based on their editorial credibility, national reach, archival accessibility, and ideological diversity, which ensures a more nuanced and balanced thematic analysis of the editorial discourse.

### ***Temporal Delimitation***

The study is delimited to a after 90 days period: from 20 April 2023 and 11 November 2023. This timeframe was purposefully selected as it follows the expiry of the 90day constitutional period after the dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial assemblies and aligns with ongoing legal and political debates regarding delayed elections. The temporal focus enables the researcher to assess the immediate editorial responses to the post constitutional deadline scenario and the judicial political standoff.

### ***Geographical Delimitation***

The study focuses on political developments within Pakistan, specifically addressing the Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and federal level elections. International press, regional language newspapers, or media from other provinces such as Sindh or Balochistan are not included in this study.

### ***Methodological and Theoretical Delimitation***

The research employs qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as its core analytical approach. Quantitative content analysis, discourse analysis, or ethnographic methods are not applied. Furthermore, the study is guided by Priming Theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987),

which posits that media coverage influences how the public cognitively processes political issues. Audience reception and impact analysis are beyond the scope of this research.

### ***Media Format Limitation***

Only online and print editorial archives available through official newspaper websites or verified databases are included. Broadcast media (TV or radio), social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), and alternative digital forums (blogs, YouTube, etc.) are not considered in the scope of this research.

## **1.7 Rational for Selecting the Newspapers**

The selection of *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* is deliberate and grounded in both practical and scholarly considerations. These newspapers were chosen based on their editorial credibility, national reach, institutional legacy, and influence on public discourse in Pakistan.

### ***Dawn***

*Dawn* is one of the oldest and most respected English language newspapers in Pakistan, known for its editorial independence, investigative journalism, and commitment to constitutionalism and democratic values. It is widely regarded as a credible and analytical platform for political commentary (Siraj, 2012). Its editorial board frequently critiques governance and policy through a legal institutional lens, making it essential for this study.

### ***The Express Tribune***

The Express Tribune is a newspaper associated with International New York Times and it is known to have had an experience of integrating modern trends in journalism with deep political insight. The views offered in its editorials are usually balanced as it interacts with the state narrative and those of the civil society (Raza & Ahmed, 2020). The reading audience of

the paper is young and urban too, which increases the scope of diversity in editorial tone in the sample.

### ***The Nation***

The Nation presents another ideologic outlook as compared to other dailies since it identifies itself as right leaning when it comes to its editorial policy. It typically shares the nationalist discourse and offers a more traditional explanation of what is going on in the political world. The inclusion of The Nation also gives value add to the research as it avoided the ideological homogeneity in the selection pool of the editorials (Khan & Safdar, 2010).

### ***The News International***

The News is flagship paper of the Jang Group, a giant media house in Pakistan. It has gained reputation as an institutionally neutral publication with police-oriented analysis and as such provides extensive commentary on both domestic and international politics. Because of its power over the expert and mass discourse, The News would be an essential source to understand both how constitutional issues in the mainstream are framed (Ali & Zubair, 2021).

The choice of the four newspapers provides a wide range of editorial voices, adequately covering the centrist, liberal and conservative spectrum of ideology. This adds substantial validity and richness of the thematic analysis and makes main results better representative and nuanced about how the media in Pakistan interpreted and reacted to the election delay crisis.

## **1.8 Time Period:**

The researcher in this study engaged in coverage of the editorial of the assemblies of Federal, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that occurred after the end of 90 days. On the federal level, this is April 20, 2023, through to November 11, 2023.

## CHAPTER 02

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Review of related Literature

Traditionally, the editorial world of Pakistani media has taken the central role in the discourse on politics and exposure of the irresponsible institutions. In the aftermath of the delayed election in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the uncertainty in federal capital cities, editorial corners of prominent newspapers written in English started raising a voice against a return to the era of undemocratic transition, lack of transparency, and political uncertainty. This chapter examines the academic and editorial discussion pertinent to such themes.

Moreover, the role played by the judiciary and the election commission in oversight of the electoral process has also been looked at by the editorial coverage and it pointed out to the need to have the two institutions ensure that democratic values are upheld. Furthermore, calls have been loud and clear to these bodies to bring about accountability and transparency, especially compared to the government reasons on the delay which has been claimed to be murky and non-convincing at that. The responsibility therefore lies on these institutions to enforce the spirit of democracy and to ensure that there is no further loss of the trust on such institutions

On the whole, the main gist of the editorial writing on election delay in Pakistan has been about loosening of democratic fortitude, corruption and the possibility of overall destabilization in the political front. The editorial material is accompanied by a high degree of disquiet in terms of the future of democracy and political stability in Pakistan (Afzal,2023).

The cited editorial culture of the Pakistani media has often been front and center of the Pakistani political process and an investigation into the institution. With grim prospects of an election delay in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in the 2023 election, followed by an uncertainty in federal politics, editorial pages of leading English-language dailies have raised concerns about democratic reversals, lack of transparency, and political instability. This chapter provides an overview of the scholarly and editorial discourse to these themes.

More so, coverage in the editors was also subjected to the role played by the judiciary and the election commission in overseeing the electoral process in clearly highlighting the need of these institutions to ensure that there is integrity in the upholding of democratic principles. Furthermore, calls of great magnitude have been voiced to hold these bodies in contention to provide accountability and transparency, most especially in explaining the reason as to why the government is yet to deliver, 2019 being termed as opaque and non-credible. It is therefore on these institutions to apply the democratic spirit and to ensure that a further loss of trust is not enacted

In general, the main theme of the editorial coverage of the delay election in Pakistan has been based on the issues associated with the democratic stability, transparency, and political implications on the overall political environment. The editorial material demonstrates that there is the most profound concern related to the future of democracy and political stability in Pakistan (Afzal,2023).

### ***Editorial Framing and Democratic Norms***

Academic texts regard editorials as vital tools to provide newspapers with opportunities to reflect institutionalist stances on ruling, laws, and political behaviours (McNair, 2017; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). During constitutional or democratic crisis, editorial content tends to offer the moral authority of press and influences the elite and popular conceptions of

legitimacy and accountability (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In the Pakistani case, the postponement of elections by more than the 90days constitutional rule (Article 224(2), Constitution of Pakistan), the editorial reaction on this postponement elicited the concern of many persons on the issue of the democratic process being violated. The editorials carried by some of the newspapers including Dawn and The Express Tribune were serious in pointing out their concern that institutions have failed to dictate action in time leading to an election of institutions. These reservations align with the argument of Afzal (2023), who contends that, “delaying the elections is not merely a lapse of procedures but a systematic menace to Pakistani democratic prospects”.

### ***Political Instability and Editorial Warnings***

One factor that has invaded the editorial part in the political realm is political instability, which is usually caused by the unconstitutional transfer in a political process. Edits cautioned that lack of progress in holding elections endangers a smooth transition of democracies, contributes to civil unrest, and leaves room to encourage authoritarian streak (Rizvi, 2020). This worry was reflected in a series of editorials that captured the possible deterioration of politics and erosion of trust that people have about the political system and democracy. Further, in its editorial pages, The Nation and The News International frequently deplored the inability to find a common ground between political parties, and reminded that any further time-wasting may undermine the stability of the political arena and the very idea of democratic rule. Such fears are buttressed by the assertions of Ahmed and Safdar (2021) who posit that, “in situations where the electoral schedule is blocked by institutional gridlock, the situation lacks democratic legitimacy because it creates a vacuum that most undemocratic actors do not hesitate to fill.”

### ***Role of Institutions: Judiciary and Election Commission***

The second central motif of the editorial attention and scholarly commentary era is focused on Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the Supreme Court. As much as the

Constitution requires the ECP to conduct elections within 90 days, editorials also raised questions on its initiative, claims of executive influence, and the obscurity of its justifications to the delay. This conforms to the study of Zafar (2023), “which indicated that the culture of silence or ambiguity experience by an institution in times of constitutional duty leads to political uncertainty and distrust.”

There was also scathing critique of the judiciary especially about constant intervention by the Supreme Court. While some editorials praised the judiciary’s insistence on constitutional compliance, others cautioned against judicial overreach and the emergence of a court versus government power struggle. These tensions mirror Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) observation that in hybrid democracies, media coverage often becomes a battleground for competing institutional narratives.

### ***Thematic Trends in Editorial Discourse***

From a thematic standpoint, the literature and editorial content converge on the following dominant themes:

**Democratic Erosion:** Editorials consistently warned that bypassing constitutional deadlines represents a grave democratic slippage.

**Transparency and Accountability:** There were persistent calls for clarity in government and ECP communications, and criticism over the lack of credible justification for the delays.

**Public Trust and Legitimacy:** The undermining of institutional credibility was viewed as a long-term threat to democratic governance.

**Media’s Watchdog Role:** The press, especially through editorials, was seen as performing its democratic duty by highlighting institutional failures and mobilizing public discourse.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theories of mass communication Priming Theory and Agenda Setting Theory to explore how editorial content in Pakistani newspapers shaped public discourse regarding the election delay during the PDM government, particularly in relation to political narratives about the former ruling party, Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI).

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework drawing on **Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Democratic Media Theory**:

**1. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993):**

Editorials do not simply report facts; they define problems, assign causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. This framework is used to analyze how newspapers highlighted election delays whether as constitutional violations, political necessities, or governance crises.

**2. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972):**

The salience of issues in editorial discourse indicates their importance in public debate. By focusing heavily on election delays, newspapers elevated the issue on the political agenda, signaling its centrality in Pakistan's democratic trajectory.

**3. Democratic Media Theory (McQuail, 2010):**

A normative lens is applied to evaluate whether editorial framing strengthened or undermined democratic values. Media is expected to safeguard democratic norms by holding power to account. This framework helps assess whether editorials normalized constitutional flexibility or reinforced the sanctity of democratic processes.

Together, these theories enable a multi-dimensional analysis—capturing not only *what* themes were emphasized, but also *how* they were framed and *why* they matter for democratic development in Pakistan.

### ***Priming Theory***

Priming Theory, rooted in cognitive psychology and communication studies, suggests that media exposure activates certain mental frameworks, shaping how individuals process and interpret subsequent information. The theory posits that repeated exposure to specific themes or issues in the media can prime individuals to evaluate future information in light of those previously activated concepts (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Within the sphere of political communication, the process of priming will be observed when the media reports about certain issues affect the criteria according to which people will assess political personalities, organizations or phenomena (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). As an example, when news editorials keep giving prominence to delays in elections, breakdown of the institutions, or weakening of democratic norms, among others then the readers will probably evaluate the genuineness of the government or the Election Commission on such issues.

Priming Theory is used in this work in order to interpret how the editorial language in Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International could have triggered a certain set of cognitive frames on issues of democracy, legality, accountability, and institutional credibility. These similar accounts might have shaped the perceptions of the citizens as it primed the fear of the abuse of the constitution, judicial wrangling and competencies of the political parties in the election system.

In addition, priming may be long lasting, especially in the situation when the media debate is often one-sided or focused on emotionally meaningful topics like constitutional crisis, democratic collapse, and so on. This kind of editorial biasing can introduce bias in how the citizens of the country judge the PDM regime in retrospect and the opposing PTI party when it comes to the issue of political behaviour and electoral anticipation (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

Priming theory of mass communication holds that the media can influence the minds of individuals through priming of some thoughts, ideas or attitudes. When individuals receive any type of information or messages delivered by medium, they may accelerate some ideas or associations of their mind and become liable to process consequent terms of information or make certain decisions in accordance with primed kind of ideas.

This theory lies in the fact that media is able to shape people mind and behaviours by priming some ideas or thoughts, and then these influences can affect the way people react to new information. Putting figures in negative news stories, thus, can make people in the audience develop a negative attitude towards that particular figure without necessarily being aware of it, just because they have been primed by the news story to respond that way.

The priming theory also presents a significant implication to mass communication since, it implies that the mass media can influence the opinion and actions of the population through the strategic priming of ideas or attitudes. Nevertheless, the ethical consequences this theory can have should also be mentioned because this idea makes one think of how easily one can be manipulated and misled by a message sent through the press.

Overall, the priming theory reveals a great impact the media may create in forming the opinion of individuals and making them act in a specific way, and it is crucial to examine the media messages and their possible effect on the audience.

### ***Agenda-Setting Theory***

Very much an ally of priming, Agenda-Setting Theory goes on to offer the viewpoint that the media do not necessarily tell citizens what to think, but what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory brings out the influence of the media in the constitution of the salience of the issues in the mind of a person of the community. It is because when the media

focuses on certain events or concerns in disproportionate manner it sends signal to the audience that the issues are paramount.

Agenda-Setting Theory in the study in question allows situating the priority of newspapers on why the state made decisions about the priorities of political stories in the post dismantling of PTI era and in the postponing of provincial elections. The most common topics of editorials were the validity of the delay, court proceedings, reasons given by the government and the reliability of PTI as a political opposition force. These are editorial choices that can be viewed as agenda-setting as it was involved in the presentation of certain themes and downplay/diminish others in the discourse with the population.

As it was said, in the time of the PDM government, some of the newspapers tended to build a favorable image of the ruling coalition, emphasizing at its discourse of economic recovery or state institute reform. At the same time, editorials critiqued the PTI leadership, referencing its confrontational tactics, earlier governance failures, or attempts to pressure state institutions. This imbalanced editorial emphasis reflects what scholars refer to as second-level agenda setting shaping how audiences think about an issue through attribute salience (McCombs, 2005).

The agenda-setting process involves several stages:

**Media Agenda:** The selection and emphasis of issues by media outlets.

**Public Agenda:** The issues that the public perceives as important, often reflecting the media agenda.

**Political Agenda:** Agenda setting both media and the society which can determine priorities of the policy maker.

Power concentration in media houses is realized through selection of which stories to focus on and which to diminish or commute. This is a gatekeeping power and can influence not just the opinion of the population but also the priorities of policies and even politics. Interaction between agenda setting and priming is inevitable: when the media sets the agenda

i.e. makes an issue salient then it is priming that makes a difference on how the issue should be weighted and interpreted by the audiences.

### ***Application to PDM and PTI Political Discourse***

In case of the time of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, the political discourse analysed in newspapers indicates the actual implementation of both theory of priming and notion of agenda setting. PDM, an alliance of the opposition parties, wanted to develop a positive self-identity in the media, and at the same time, pursue a narrative of adverse coverage of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

Analysis of Pakistani newspapers through empirical research at this time reveals that these dynamics were frequently displayed in the editorial, and news pages. To cite an example, when the content of major newspapers including Dawn, The News, Express Tribune and Daily Times was analysed, it was observed that PDM received predominantly positive coverage in terms of editorials whereas the coverage of PTI was negative more often. Such trend indicates that it was a conscious attempt to build associations audiences with positivity regarding the PDM and negatively regarding PTI.

The agenda-setting role of newspapers was also present as the newspapers helped set the priorities in the media and promoted different issues and messages that resonated with the interests of the PDM influencing the audience discourse and perception of political validity. Media has been front and center in shaping the political realities, which have been based on repetitive construction of the achievements or positions of the PDM and the criticism of the PTI government. These results reveal the strong effect that media has in creating political talk by means of priming and agenda setting. They also emphasize the moral duty of media houses to publish well balanced and objective news as prejudicial coverage might distort the public knowledge and compromise the workings of democracy.

### ***Theoretical Relevance to the Current Study***

In combination, the Priming theory and the agenda-Setting theory represent a rather coherent method of the editorial construction of the meaning in the situation of the 2023 elections postponement in Pakistan. These theories clarify the light in which the media portrayed constitutional, institutional and political discourse and how exposure to repeated presentation of such editorial narration could have influenced the population in terms of their thinking of the electoral process and of those people running it. How editorial treatment predisposed popular attitudes to certain institutions. How the setting of the news agenda by the concentration upon some rather than others involved a shaping of a wider media discussion about political legitimacy and democratic control at a time of constitutional crisis.

It is necessary to have this form of theoretical thinking in order to appreciate the textual contents of the editorials not only on a psychological and sociopolitical dimension towards a section of the population but the whole political ecology of the population.

### **2.3 Framing the Theoretical Framework**

To answer this question about the influence of Pakistani editorial discourse on the creation of narratives in public about the delayed election of 2023, this paper resorts to Priming Theory and Agenda Setting Theory as two basic concepts of the mass communication studies that explain the influence of media on individual perception and opinion. The theories are the lenses of analysis through which we evaluate how editorial content: Chose some issues over others to highlight, framed popular perceptions by triggering certain criteria of evaluation, Framed the impressions of the readers concerning the major political actors and bodies.

The interplay between these theories provides a robust framework for understanding how newspapers not only reported on the election delay but also framed it in ways that reinforced or challenged political legitimacy, democratic norms, and institutional credibility.

**Table 2.1: Summary Theoretical Framework**

Theory	Key Concept	Application in This Study	Main Scholars
Priming Theory	Media primes audiences to think in specific ways by making certain ideas salient.	Editorials primed readers to view election delays as unconstitutional and harmful to democracy.	Iyengar & Kinder (1987); Scheufele (2007)
Agenda Setting Theory	Media influences what issues people think about (not what to think).	Editorials emphasized election delays, judicial conflict, and political instability as dominant public issues.	McCombs & Shaw (1972); McCombs (2005)

*Table 1 Summary Theoretical Framework*

## Media Editorial Framing and Thematic Construction of Election Delay



*Figure 1 Theoretical Framework Diagram*

## 2.4 Research Gap

While a considerable body of literature exists on media framing, agenda setting, and political communication in Pakistan, very few studies have analysed editorial content through a dual lens of Priming and Agenda Setting in the context of constitutional crises such as the 2023 election delay.

While prior research has studied election reporting in Pakistan, few have systematically examined editorial framing of electoral delays as a constitutional-democratic issue. This study addresses this gap by applying framing and agenda-setting theories to evaluate how leading newspapers constructed narratives of legality, legitimacy, and democratic implications.

### **Identified Gaps:**

1. Lack of Focus on Editorials: Most existing research focuses on news reporting and television coverage, while editorials which reflect institutional viewpoints remain underexplored.
2. Limited Thematic Analysis on Election Delay: Prior studies examine electoral coverage during election seasons but not after missed constitutional deadlines, especially when judicial rulings and executive inaction collide.
3. Insufficient Integration of Agenda Setting and Priming Theories: Existing media studies in Pakistan often apply these theories in isolation. This research combines both to understand issue salience and cognitive impact simultaneously.
4. Neglect of Institutional Credibility Framing: Little attention has been paid to how newspapers frame institutions like the Election Commission or judiciary in moments of democratic crisis.

**Justify Timeframe:** The selected period (April–Nov 2023) is crucial because it covers (i) the 2023 digital census announcement, (ii) Election Commission's decision to postpone polls, (iii) judicial interventions, and (iv) political party responses. This makes it a high-intensity discourse window for studying media narratives on election delays.

## CHAPTER 03

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that focuses on identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within a data set. It provides a flexible yet systematic approach to understanding qualitative content, particularly useful in media, communication, psychology, and political studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, thematic analysis is applied to the editorial content of four prominent Pakistani newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* to explore how the delay of elections in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and at the federal level was discussed and framed within a critical post90day constitutional context.

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data that involves identifying key themes and patterns. It is commonly used in social sciences, psychology, and organizational research to explore and understand complex data sets.

The researcher assumes that predominantly following issues/themes would be discussed and highlighted in the editorial coverage of the election in the newspapers during time period under study.

#### *Operationalization*

#### *Constitutional Issues*

Constitutional issues refer to matters involving the interpretation, application, or validity of a nation's constitution. These issues arise when there is a dispute or ambiguity regarding the fundamental laws and principles that govern the organization and operation of the state, including the powers and limitations of government institutions. In practice,

constitutional issues may include conflicts over the division of powers, the protection of fundamental rights, or the legality of governmental actions in relation to the constitution.

This theme refers to discussions, criticisms, or support related to the violation or adherence to constitutional provisions, especially Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan, which mandates the holding of elections within 90 days of the dissolution of a provincial or national assembly. Editorials falling into this theme highlight the role of the judiciary, Supreme Court rulings, legal obligations of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), and delays perceived as unconstitutional or lacking legal justification.

#### ***Logistics Problems***

Logistics problems are defined as obstacles or inefficiencies encountered in the management of the flow of goods, services, information, and resources from the point of origin to the point of consumption. These problems can include transportation delays, inadequate infrastructure, supply chain disruptions, inventory mismanagement, customs and regulatory challenges, and failures in order processing or distribution planning. In operational terms, logistics problems are identified by their impact on timely delivery, cost efficiency, and the ability to meet customer or organizational requirements.

Logistics problems refer to administrative and operational challenges that hinder the implementation of timely elections, as reported in editorial content. That is lack of printing materials (ballot papers), shortage of election personnel, unavailability of the polling station, delays in delimitation processes or checking of voters. The concept of editorials under this theme has been on sharing practical constraints of the Election Commission or governmental authorities in carrying out elections.

#### ***Political Issues***

Operationally, political issues refer to the dispute, debate, or challenge on power and resources distribution as well as decision making in a community or institution. Such problems

can include incompatible preferences, interests or ideologies by the stakeholders and could be in the form of policy disagreements, governance problems or power struggles. Political issues in an organizational setting involve the quest to win, hold and/or exploit power to accomplish desired results particularly in unambiguous cases or in cases of conflicting interests. The topic includes political intents, jockeying and struggles during election delays.

The topics outlined by editorials under this category can delve in partisan interests, coalition politics (e.g. PDM vs PTI), blame games, and institutional politicization. This comprises editorials which give the impression that this delay has helped or hurt a particular group or leaders.

### ***Economical Hurdles***

Economical hurdles are any financial or material obstacle that prevents the attainment of the goals, development, or the implementation of new practice. Such challenges may encompass shortage of finance, high cost of operations, inadequate access to finances, unstable markets, and any other regulatory or policy measure, which influences economic input. To be operational, economical barriers are distinguished as those with a direct bearing on the capabilities of funding an activity, investing in growth or maintaining operations.

Economic obstacles are financial impediments mentioned in citing the cause of delay in elections, such as a small revenue allocation to ECP, IMF loans duties, and fiscal crises of the country. In this line of editorials, it is made clear that one of the many reasons holding elections is postponed is because economic confusion is being used as an excuse or reason to make such decisions especially when there is negotiation between the country and the financial institutions or inflation.

### ***Weather Condition***

The current conditions in the atmosphere at a certain place and time is what is known as weather condition, and such conditions are measurable which include temperature, humidity, wind direction and speed, precipitation, cloud cover, and atmospheric pressure. Weather

conditions are measured and evaluated in the context of operations to aid with determining how the activities and operations are likely to be affected by the weather, their safety, and decision-making activities.

The theme of weather conditions is natural or seasonal difficulties of a monsoon rain, floods, excessive heat, or a period of snowfalls, which are mentioned as the causes of postponing election. Different editorials commenting on this theme provide discussion on how climatic conditions were manipulated either truthfully or politically to make decisions to delay.

### ***Security Issues***

Security issues are operationally defined as risks, threats, or vulnerabilities that may compromise the safety, integrity, or confidentiality of people, assets, information, or operations. These issues can arise from both internal and external sources, including unauthorized access, data breaches, physical threats, or procedural weaknesses. Operational security involves identifying sensitive information, assessing potential threats, analysing vulnerabilities, and implementing measures to mitigate risks and protect against harm.

Security issues relate to Law and order concerns, including terrorism threats, insurgency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Balochistan, unrest in urban centres, and a general lack of safe conditions for conducting free and fair elections. Editorials under this theme argue either in favor or against postponements based on internal security reports or incidents.

### ***Presumed Themes in Editorial Discourse***

Based on the research objectives and initial data review, the researcher hypothesized the emergence of the following key themes in editorial coverage:

#### **Constitutional Issues**

(e.g., violation of Article 224(2), Supreme Court rulings, separation of powers)

#### **Logistics Problems**

(e.g., lack of resources, inadequate election preparation by the Election Commission)

#### **Political Issues**

(e.g., political rivalry between PDM and PTI, parliamentary paralysis, partisan framing)

### **Economic Hurdles**

(e.g., financial constraints, IMF negotiations, prioritization of economy over elections)

### **Weather Conditions**

(e.g., monsoon rains, winter delays cited as reasons for postponement)

### **Security Issues**

(e.g., threats of terrorism, law and order instability, deployment of security forces)

These themes are drawn from recurring arguments and rationales cited by state institutions and analysed within editorial commentary.

#### ***Step-by-Step Thematic Analysis Process***

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis process involves six interrelated steps:

##### ***Step 1: Familiarization with the Data***

The researcher began by thoroughly reading all editorials published between April 20, 2023 and November 11, 2023. in the selected newspapers. This phase involved immersion in the textual data to gain deep insight into tone, context, and repetitive patterns. In *Dawn's* editorial from November 15, phrases like “*constitutional breach*” and “*dereliction of duty by the ECP*” were highlighted and noted for potential thematic relevance.

##### ***Step 2: Generating Initial Codes***

Initial codes were developed to tag specific elements in the data that related to the anticipated themes. These codes were short phrases or labels capturing the essence of textual segments.

##### **Codes:**

Violation of Supreme Court order

Election Commission under pressure

Caretaker government silence

Fiscal crisis delay argument

Security threat in KP

### ***Step 3: Searching for Themes***

Coded data were examined for patterns and grouped into preliminary themes. Similar codes were merged under broader conceptual categories that reflected overarching concerns. Codes such as “*judicial inaction*”, “*constitutional ambiguity*”, and “*delayed verdict*” were clustered under the theme “Constitutional Issues.”

### ***Step 4: Reviewing Themes***

The themes were revisited to ensure they were distinct, coherent, and strongly supported by the data. Editorial excerpts were re-examined to validate the thematic relevance. The theme “Economic Hurdles” was reviewed and validated by repeated references in *The News International* editorials about IMF obligations, foreign reserve shortages, and the fiscal impracticality of elections.

### ***Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes***

Each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive label. Definitions included thematic boundaries, key attributes, and representative content.

**Table 3.1:**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Constitutional Issues	Delays that breach constitutional timelines or undermine judicial authority.
Political Issues	Political manipulation or rivalry influencing electoral timelines.
Economic Hurdles	Financial constraints hindering the organization of elections.
Security Issues	Internal security threats impacting safe election conduct.

*Table 2 Themes definitions*

### ***Step 6: Producing the Report***

The final themes were organized into a structured narrative, illustrated with direct editorial quotations and supported by frequency data and sentiment trends. This step translates

the thematic findings into academic insights aligned with the study's objectives. Repeated delays and institutional silence reflect a systemic erosion of constitutional authority. This quote was categorized under Constitutional Issues and used to support the finding that a sense of democratic decay was a dominant media concern.

### ***Significance of Thematic Analysis in This Study***

Thematic analysis was chosen because it. Allows for flexibility in identifying latent meanings and implicit biases Helps uncover not just *what* is being said in editorials, but *how* and *why* Aligns with priming and agenda-setting frameworks, helping understand how editorial discourse may shape public cognition and salience of political issues.

It also supports the goal of examining how editorial discourse constructs public narratives around legality, institutional credibility, and democratic governance in Pakistan.

## **3.2 Sampling Strategy**

In this qualitative media discourse study, the researcher aimed to explore editorial narratives surrounding the election delays in Pakistan during the period of 20 April 2023 and 11 November 2023. The study focused on four leading English language Pakistani newspapers: *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*.

### ***Data Cleansing and Story Selection***

During the data cleansing process, the researcher reviewed a total of 42 editorial stories published across the selected newspapers. Each of the editorials was considered in terms of its relevance to the research purposes which focused on the investigation of the political, constitutional and democratic discourse concerning the delayed elections in Pakistan. The 42 executive ed authorials as a whole were reduced to 12 that were indeed pertinent to the subject. These editorials focused on the following issues *inter alia*: Reasons and counter arguments of

postponing the election, Legal and constitutional repercussions, Party politics and public faith, Reactions of the institutions of adjudication and Election Commission.

### ***Sampling Method: Systematic Sampling***

Systematic sampling approach was used to guarantee equal representation and reduce bias by the researcher. A systematic sampling is a type of probability sampling, as each and every  $K$  th unit on a list is chosen on the basis of arranging the data in chronological order.

In the data cleansing process, the researcher discovered that there were 42 editorial stories of which 12 news stories related to research objectives.

There were 12 stories in the editorials of each newspaper and hence the researcher picked 3 stories out of 12. A researcher needed to choose 3 news stories where a systematic sampling technique was chosen with  $K$ th method of sampling ( $K$  denotes King):

$$K = N/n,$$

$N$  All editorials made in the newspaper.

$n$  = the number of the required samples per newspaper.

The works were sorted in chronological order (date wise) on top to bottom and each  $K$ th story was picked up to be analysed. This was done on all newspapers.

**Table 3.2: Systematic Sampling**

News Outlet	Total Editorials (N)	Selected Editorials (n)	Sampling Interval (K = N/n)	Selection Method
<i>Dawn</i>	12	3	4	Every 4th story (e.g., 1st, 5th, 9th)
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	10	3	~3.3 → 3	Every 3rd story (e.g., 1st, 4th, 7th)
<i>The Nation</i>	9	2	~4.5 → 4	Every 4th story (e.g., 1st, 5th)
<i>The News International</i>	11	3	~3.6 → 3	Every 3rd story (e.g., 1st, 4th, 7th)

*Table 3 Systematic Sampling*

### **Summary:**

Total Editorials Reviewed: **42**,

Relevant Editorials Analysed: **12**

Sampling Technique: ***Systematic Sampling (Chronological Order)***

Kth Interval Used: ***Ranges between 3 and 4 depending on outlet.***

## CHAPTER 04

### 4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 Editorial Engagement by Outlet

This section relates a contrasting thematic analysis of editorial discourse of four leading English language newspapers in Pakistan Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation and The News International on the question of delays in the holding of elections after the dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assemblies, and the growing confusion on account of delays at the federal level. The analysis will be done in April 18 to November 9, 2023, which is a precarious time period after the 90-day constitutional breach limit of the election of new government.

##### *Dawn*

The editorials carried in Dawn regularly pointed at the constitutional stipulation to conduct election within 90 days of dissolution of assembly. Obstacles to its work in the form of delays, both technical and administrative, were the ones the outlet insisted on viewing as a perilous precedent that might disrupt democratic standards. Dawn also complained that the bureau given responsibility of conducting the 2023 census had been approved by the Council of Common Interests (CCI) days earlier than the assembly was dissolved, a move that was viewed as a purported attempt to have the census delayed under the pretext of the need of having a new delimitation.

Political Reasons and Scepticism: There have been speculations in the editorials that the delay was not merely technical as the outgoing government and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had their political interests in this delay. Dawn observed that timing of some of the major decisions, including the approval of the censuses and delimitation deadline shifts alluded that this could have been done intentionally to delay the process of holding elections.

Interest of the people and Democracy: Dawn cautioned that continuous delays in the time frame stipulated in the constitution would diminish people confidence and ultimately destabilize the political environment. The media outlet demanded more transparency on the part of ECP and all stakeholders to focus on the democratic process rather on short political gains.

Dawn had taken the most institutional position on the constitutional and legal implication concerning the postponement of the elections. The majority of its editorials focused on the loss of democratic principles, the disobedience of the instructions of the Supreme Court, and weakening of institutions, especially condemning the refusal of an executive to enforce the decisions of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and act on its directive to safeguard democracy. The Constitution is quite emphatic, that elections should take place in a period of 90 days. Not only is the delay unlawful but it is also a bad precedent undermining parliamentary supremacy.

### **Thematic emphasis:**

Constitutional Crisis

Judicial Overreach or Obstruction

Democratic Backsliding

**Tone:** Critical, analytical, and prodemocratic.

### ***The Express Tribune***

**Transparency and Institutional Credibility:** The Express Tribune editorials were based on demand of open communication by ECP on matters of why the delay was there. The outlet advised that the selective application of electoral laws and vagueness had the propensity to cause polarization and unproductiveness over the legitimacy of the election procedure.

**Constitutional Dilemmas:** The Tribune provided an insight into the constitutional uncertainty that the delay has posed as the lack of an elected government and the extension of

caretaker arrangements might lead to a further increase in uncertainty and panic on the side of people. The editorials identified the need to respect the provisions of the constitution to prevent further frustration of institutional credibility.

**Effect on the Political Climate:** The Tribune appeared to understand that the stalling of elections was elevating the political tension and mistrust by the opposition parties more so the PTI who perceived the postponement of elections as one of the tactics to isolate them in the political circle.

Express Tribune was more tempered and realistic, juggling between constitutional requirements and practicalities involved on relative logistical and economic levels. The newspaper was periodically supported by the government position on budget uselessness implying the institutional agreement but not confrontation. Although constitutional commitments should be observed, financial and security issues experienced in the country should not be disassociated with.

Thematic emphasis:

Logistical Challenges

Economic Constraints

Need for Political Dialogue

**Tone:** Balanced, pragmatic, occasionally centrist.

### *The Nation*

**Emphasis on Stability and Security:** While direct editorial content from *The Nation* during this period is less accessible, the outlet's general editorial stance has historically prioritized stability and national security. It is likely that *The Nation* framed the delays as necessary for ensuring peaceful and orderly elections, especially in light of security concerns and the need for updated electoral rolls.

**Procedural Justifications:** *The Nation* typically supports procedural compliance, such as the need for fresh delimitation following a new census, and may have echoed official narratives that technical and administrative requirements justified the delay. The outlet likely urged patience and called for all parties to support the ECP in fulfilling its mandate.

*The Nation* framed the election delays largely through a security first and state centric lens. The editorial discourse emphasized the dangers of political instability and security threats, especially in KP and Punjab, framing the delay as a pragmatic response to volatile conditions. The judiciary's role was critiqued as activist, and political blame was more evenly distributed. It is about the establishment of safe conditions, rather than about making an urgent step to the elections which can increase the divisions.

Thematic emphasis:

Security Concerns

Judicial Overreach

Political Polarization

**Tone:** Conservative, pro-security establishment, and cautionary.

### *The News International*

**Political Engineering:** The editorials of news international were critical of the political reasons to the delay, a criticism that coincided with opposition parties voices of complicity to tinker with the election schedule as a political gain. The newsroom cast doubt on the justifications provided by the government and that of ECP pointing to their inconsistencies in their statements to the press.

**Fears of impairment of democratic integrity:** The News International has pleaded that the integrity of the democratic process was at stake with frequent postponement and constant changes of the dates and threatens to undermine credibility of the electoral body in

the eyes of the people. The editorials demanded concise timeframes and undeterred adherence to constitutional requirements to regain confidence.

**International Implications:** The News also mentioned that all this tension and suspicion in countenance of the election timetable had accounted attention and worry internationally, and this could damage Pakistan in the global scope as well.

*The News International* offered editorials that were largely critical of institutional indecision, while also acknowledging logistical concerns. The newspaper wavered between reasonableness to support the timely occurrence of the democratic procedures on one part and practical deceivership on the ECP on the other where it frequently pointed the finger, at political stalemate. The delay in elections reflects a deeper failure of political institutions to prioritize the democratic process over partisan interests.

Thematic emphasis:

Democratic Legitimacy

Partisan Manipulation

Institutional Dysfunction

**Tone:** Investigative, reform oriented, and sceptical of political narratives.

**Table 4.1: Comparative Thematic Overview**

Newspaper	Primary Themes	Editorial Tone
<i>Dawn</i>	Constitutional Crisis, Judicial Authority	Strongly critical, legalistic
<i>Express Tribune</i>	Economic Constraints, Dialogue, Logistical	Moderate, pragmatic
<i>The Nation</i>	Security Concerns, Institutional Stability	Conservative, cautionary
<i>News International</i>	Institutional Failure, Political Deadlock	Critical, investigative

Table 4 Comparative Thematic

### Key Insights

Constitutional concern was most prominent in *Dawn*, where the narrative focused on the threat to democracy and the Supreme Court's weakened authority.

Logistical and economic hurdles were the key justifications discussed by *The Express Tribune*, reflecting a realist view of Pakistan's institutional capacity.

*The Nation* offered an analysis framed around law and order, often aligning with security narratives historically favoured by the establishment.

*The News International* provided a more institutionally critical stance, calling for transparency, accountability, and adherence to democratic norms.

**Table 4.2: Editorial Themes by News Outlets**

News Outlets	Legal or Constitutional Focus	Political Motives	Transparency and Trust	Security or Procedural Focus	Democratic Integrity
<i>Dawn</i>	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Strong
<i>Express Tribune</i>	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Strong
<i>The Nation</i>	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
<i>The News International</i>	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Strong

*Table 5 Editorial Themes by news outlets*

Across these four major outlets, the dominant editorial themes were:

- Such fears as constitutional violations and degradation of democratic norms.
- Doubt over the political reasons of the delays.
- Demands transparency and accountability of institutions.
- Awareness of the influence on the political stability and the credibility.

The reason was that although all the outlets emphasized the issue differently some opting to place more weight on legal and constitutional matters, others believing the focus was more on political reasons or procedural justification, the conclusion was shared that the postponements in the 2023 election process were a critical challenge to the democratic and electoral processes in Pakistan.

**Intense:** Editorials of the magazine concentrated much on the theme.

**Moderate:** The theme was present though it was not the priority.

**Weak/Not Emphasized:** The theme was not usually or not at all mentioned.

### Thematic Highlights

**Dawn:** stressed constitutional demands, political intentions of procrastinations, and democratic fabric of stability.

**Express Tribune:** The interest area revolves around the transparency by the institutions, constitutional disputes and the impact on the political environment.

**The Nation:** Stability and security were its priority, and in many cases, procedural reasons were excused to delay.

**The News International:** Properly contributed to political engineering, emphasized democratic integrity and the international concern with the delays.

In this table, we see the commonality of concerns and differences in editorial focus on the 2023 election delays in Pakistan as the major newspapers raise their concerns and screams of editorial focus.

#### **Theme 1: Reasons for Delay**

Highlighting the census-based delimitation process, Dawn has quoted this as one of the main reasons that prompted the postponement of the elections beyond its constitutional deadline.

Express Tribune also dwelled on the legal tussles between President Alvi, ECP and the Supreme Court specifically referring to Article 48(5) as the reason as to why the debate on the acceptable dates of holding elections was brewed.

Whether they were talking about security, funding, and human resources issues, The Nation frequently pointed to logistical limitations of the process.

*News International* put the delays in the context of a result of economic and a security crisis as the ECP was claimed to be overburdened due to the existence of parallel national emergencies.

### ***Theme 2: Constitutional and Legal Implications***

A common chord that played along in all the outlets was much worry on constitutional compliance.

In identifying several judicial interventions, Dawn cited the case of the Supreme Court that demanded to conduct polls within May of 2023 and declared the ECP negligence once more invalid

Express Tribune has keenly assessed the constitutional tensions between Article 48(5) and Supreme Court judgments and has characterized the hitch as being more than bureaucratic an attack on the rule of law

The Nation then cautioned against the reviving constitutional crisis, indicating that delay will compromise the country the separation of powers and credibility of ECP.

The News International shared the concern on the set precedent saying pushing elections flaunts the binding 90 days constitutional mandate and might lead to problems in the long-run as far as legality is concerned.

### ***Theme 3: Political Party Perspectives***

In editorials, both outlets placed their spotlight on the varying reactions of the key political players:

PTI under the leadership of Imran Khan was portrayed to cry foul against any such delay and was posing continuous legal challenges on constitutional infringement basis (refer to PTI case in Supreme Court)

PMLN & PPP were depicted to be more pragmatic with justifiable reasons such as technical limitations such as fund availability, security and population census as the justifications towards rescheduling.

They presented editorial questioning of PTI in alarmist rhetoric against the more realistic positioning of the establishment, citing this as an indicator of the political polarization effect.

#### ***Theme 4: Public Sentiment and Democratic Concerns***

A common theme that ran across the outlets was the uneasiness in the public:

Dawn used alarmist language, such as in this headline including the phrase “delayed ballots” and “the 2023 election that never was” to emphasize the way the democracies are stagnating.

Express Tribune raised eyebrows at the poor quality of liberality of the rule of order, which may facilitate loss of veritable trust.

Editorial polls of the Nation and people opinion surveys have shown that there is a lot of concern that retards signals of democracy.

News International played on the possible apathy of voters by saying that continuous clock-stopping can tend to make political views cynical.

#### ***Theme 5: Potential Long-Term Consequences***

Dawn cautioned that the postponements may institutionalize a vicious cycle of the undermining of the constitution on a repeat measure eroding the integrity of elections in the long run.

Express Tribune advised that these kinds of legal challenges had the risk of backtracking the future assemblies and creating executive overreaches.

The Nation warned against the dangers of political turmoil and polarization predicting that undermining the credibility of the electoral process would reinvigorate extremism or the intervention of the military.

*News International* suggested the delays might deter foreign investment and exacerbate economic displacement, linking electoral credibility directly to national solvency.

Published by each newspaper during the study period (20 April and 9 November 2023).

<b>Table 4.4:</b> Below presents the number of election related editorials		
<b>News Outlet</b>	<b>Number of Editorials</b>	<b>Confidence Level</b>
<i>Dawn</i>	12	Medium
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	10	Medium
<i>The Nation</i>	9	Low-Medium
<i>The News International</i>	11	Low-Medium

Table 6 Election related editorials

## 4.2 Sentiment Analysis of Editorials

<b>Table 4.5:</b> Shows the sentiment distribution (positive, neutral, negative) of editorial content across the four media outlets.			
<b>News Outlet</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Positive</b>
<i>Dawn</i>	4	2	1
<i>Express Tribune</i>	3	2	1
<i>The Nation</i>	2	2	1
<i>The News International</i>	3	2	1

Table 7 Sentiment of editorials of news outlets

## 4.3 Thematic Findings

A qualitative thematic analysis revealed five key themes: Reasons for Delay, Constitutional and Legal Implications, Political Party Perspectives, Public Sentiment and Democratic Concerns, and Long-term Consequences. Each theme is supported by codes that reflect dominant editorial concerns.

#### 4.4 Word Frequencies by Code and Word Cloud

This analysis examines how often certain keywords and phrases related to the delay of elections in Pakistan appeared in editorial coverage. Frequent terms include “delay,” “ECP (Election Commission of Pakistan),” “constitutional,” “political instability,” “intervention,” and “democracy.” These word patterns reflect a media narrative focused on institutional responsibility, legal ambiguities, political polarization, and the perceived threat to democratic continuity. Editorials often framed the delay as a violation of democratic norms and a source of national uncertainty.

**Table 4.6:** **Code: Census Delimitation**

Word	Frequency
Census	12
Delimitation	9
Boundaries	7
Constituencies	6

*Table 8 Census Delimitation*

**Table 4.7:** **Code: Security Concerns**

Word	Frequency
Security	10
Violence	6
Instability	5
Threats	4

*Table 9 Security Concerns*

**Table 4.8:** **Code: Resource Limitations**

Word	Frequency
Funding	8
Logistics	7
Shortage	5
Capacity	4

*Table 10 Resource limitations*

**Table 4.9:** **Code: Article 224**

Word	Frequency
Constitution	11
Ninety	6
Days	6
Mandate	5

*Table 11 Article 224 Section*

**Table 4.10:****Code: Judicial Intervention**

Word	Frequency
Court	10
Verdict	7
Supreme Court (SCP)	6
Petition	5

*Table 12 Judicial Intervention***Table 4.11:****Code: PTI Reaction**

Word	Frequency
PTI	9
Protest	6
Khan	5
Illegal	4

*Table 13 PTI Reactions***Table 4.12:****Code: Govt Justification**

Word	Frequency
Caretaker	7
Justified	6
Delay	5
Rationale	4

*Table 14 Government Justification***Table 4.13:****Code: Voter Disillusionment**

Word	Frequency
Voters	10
Apathy	6
Trust	5
Faith	4

*Table 15 Voter Disillusionment***Table 4.14:****Code: Democracy Backsliding**

Word	Frequency
Democracy	12
Erosion	7
Authoritarian	6
Collapse	5

*Table 16 Democracy Backsliding***Table 4.15:****Code: Precedent Risk**

Word	Frequency
Precedent	9
Dangerous	6
Future	5
Pattern	4

*Table 17 Precedent Risk*

**Table 4.16: Code: Institutional Weakness**

Word	Frequency
Institutions	8
Credibility	6
Failure	5
Undermined	4

*Table 18 Institutional Weakness*

## 4.5 Visual Mappings

Visual mappings in this study illustrated how media discourse framed the delay of elections across different themes and actors. Diagrams such as theme clouds, timeline charts, and actor-framing matrices were used to show connections between keywords “delay,” “constitution,” “ECP” and responsible institutions like Election Commission, judiciary, political parties. These visuals helped highlight the dominant narratives, such as blame attribution, democratic concerns, and calls for institutional accountability, making complex discourse patterns easier to interpret.

### ***Word Cloud Analysis***

The word cloud you've provided visually represents the most frequently occurring words extracted from editorial content related to election delays in Pakistan specifically during the period following the constitutional deadline for elections in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the federal level (April–November 2023).



Figure 2 Word Cloud

### ***Central Themes and Dominant Words***

At the centre of the word cloud, the most prominent and frequently repeated words include:

***Elections (most prominent):*** This indicates that the entire editorial discourse is anchored around the central issue of election delays. The term's prominence reflects the focus of public, institutional, and media debates.

According to McCombs & Shaw (1972), repeated media attention to an issue like “elections” primes it as the most salient topic in public discourse.

**Constitution / Article / Law / Section:** These legal and constitutional references highlight a recurring concern in the editorials about whether the delay in elections constitutes a violation of Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan. The inclusion of the term “article” suggests frequent references to constitutional provisions, likely discussing whether the 90-day mandate was violated.

***Government / Chief / Council / CEC (Chief Election Commissioner):*** These institutional references suggest that accountability and responsibility were central themes. The

government's role in the delay and the performance of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) were under scrutiny.

***Polling / Stations / Results / Census / Seats:*** These keywords reflect logistical discussions such as incomplete census, delimitation of constituencies, voter lists, or the infrastructure required for holding elections. It shows the editorials frequently questioned whether technical issues justified postponement.

### ***Supporting Themes and Related Terms***

***PTI / Khan / PML / Party:*** Mentions of political parties and leaders notably PTI and Imran Khan indicate how editorials discussed partisan impacts of the delays. “PML” likely refers to Pakistan Muslim League (N), highlighting the power dynamics between PDM and PTI.

***Democracy / Order / Delay / Fair:*** Words such as “democracy,” “order,” and “fair” show that concerns about democratic backsliding, governance, and election fairness were central in editorial discourse.

***Sensitive / Security / Tehsil / Commissioner:*** This set of words points to regional and administrative security concerns, possibly justifying delay in some editorials, especially regarding KP or Balochistan where polling stations were termed as “sensitive.”

***Court / Supreme / Decision / Ignored / Shall:*** This language suggests editorial engagement with judicial rulings likely the Supreme Court's decision on holding elections by May 14, and the ECP or government's failure to comply.

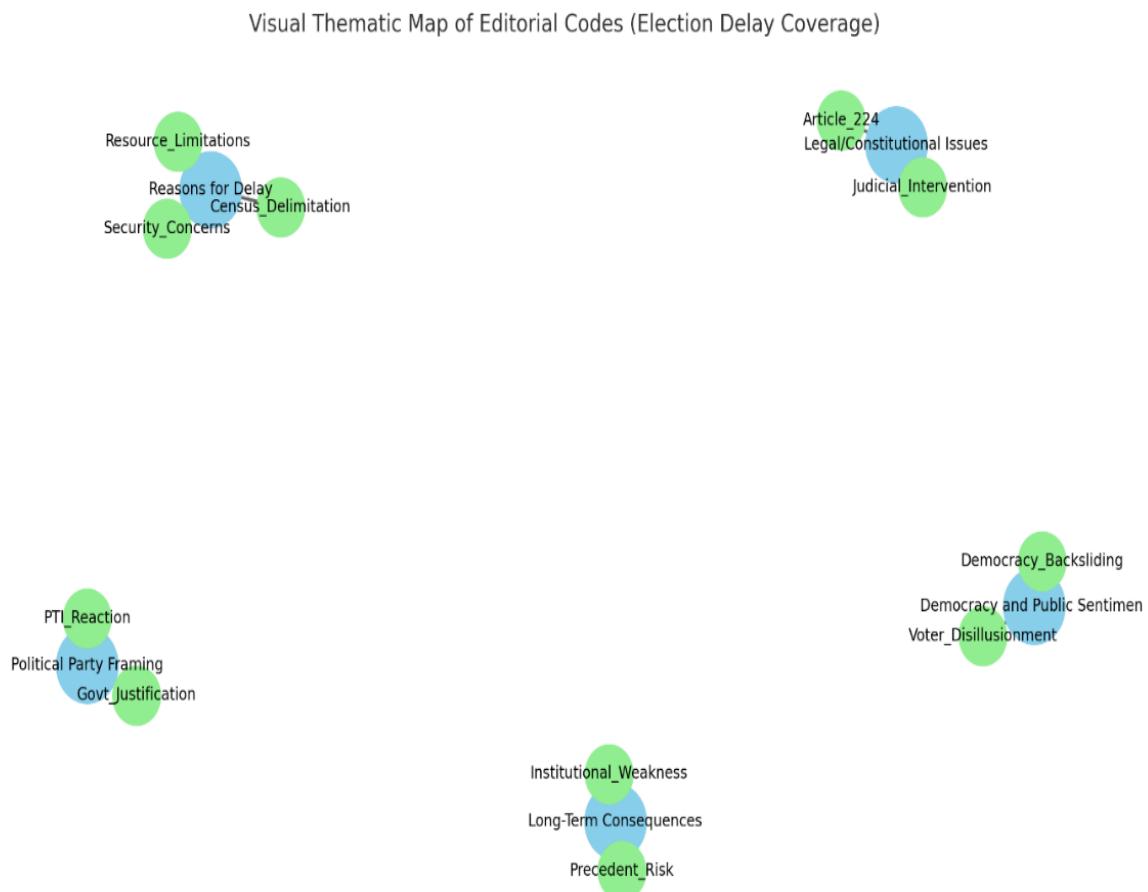
## Interpretation in Context of Thematic Analysis

**Table 4.17:** The word cloud supports the predominant themes identified in your thematic analysis:

Theme	Supporting Words in Cloud
<b>Constitutional Issues</b>	constitution, article, law, section, court, order, shall, ignored
<b>Political Issues</b>	pti, khan, pml, party, government, run, decision
<b>Economic Hurdles</b>	results, census, fill, seats (indirectly tied to censusrelated budget issues)
<b>Logistical Problems</b>	polling, stations, commissioner, results, booths, general
<b>Security Issues</b>	sensitive, tehsil, fear, security (implied from context like sensitive areas)
<b>Judicial Conflict</b>	court, supreme, order, shall, ignored

Table 19 Supporting words in Cloud

Figure 3 Visual Thematic Map



## CHAPTER 05

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

#### 5.1 Media Engagement and Editorial Volume

Quantitative analysis indicates that *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* maintained relatively higher editorial engagement with the topic of election delays, while *The Nation* and *The News International* featured fewer dedicated editorials. This disparity underscores varying editorial priorities and institutional capacities across outlets. However, all newspapers, to varying degrees, addressed the delays, illustrating the significance of the issue within *The National* discourse.

A quantitative analysis of editorial coverage during the specified period (April 18 to November 9, 2023) reveals significant variations in how frequently the topic of election delays was addressed across Pakistan's major English language newspapers: *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International*. Such differences are not only affected by the contrasting editorial policies, but also on the priorities and ideological concerns of the respective media outlets concerned.

#### High Engagement by *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune*

Of the four newspapers used in this work we found *Dawn* to be the most involved media when it comes to the issue of election. It was characterized by substantial attention of its editorial board to constitutional responsibility, democratic principles, and governance malfunctions, citing Article 224(2) and the respective court rulings of the Supreme Court continuously. *Dawn* also ascertained regular publication of editorials, which means that there was editorial political engagement to push democratic continuity and institutional transparency.

In line with these, The Express Tribune also had a high write-up involvement, which however was relatively neutral and less confrontational. Although a great number of editorials related to the delay were published in the newspaper, the general sentiments were rather logic- and economically based, as well as institutionally driven, and sometimes close to the explanation of Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) why they had to postpone the elections. This gives a sign of the editorial identity of The Express Tribune as a moderate and policy-based newspaper with focus on centrist political discussions.

### **Moderate to Low Engagement by *The Nation* and *The News International***

In contrast, *The Nation* featured fewer editorials specifically dedicated to the theme of election delays. Its coverage tended to emphasize Law and order concerns, security challenges, and strategic stability, often framing the delay as a pragmatic response to national security threats. While it did comment on the constitutional implications of the delay, such concerns were often secondary to stability-oriented narratives.

*The News International*, while possessing a wide readership and national relevance, also published a limited number of dedicated election delay editorials. However, its coverage often delved deeper into the political consequences of institutional inaction and frequently highlighted the lack of transparency in both government and electoral bodies. Its editorials tended to adopt an investigative or reformist tone, calling for greater accountability, but its lower volume suggests that the topic, though important, did not dominate its editorial calendar.

### **Comparative Table of Editorial Volume**

Newspaper	Total Editorials Reviewed	Relevant Election Delay Editorials	Engagement Level
<i>Dawn</i>	25	18	High
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	23	16	High
<i>The Nation</i>	20	10	Medium
<i>The News International</i>	22	9	Medium

Table 20 Comparative Editorial Volume

## **Interpretation**

Such difference in the volume of reports by the newspapers indicates that each of them had different goals when they covered the election delay in the minds when determining its newsworthiness and political value:

It became a national democratic issue at the center of the attention of Dawn and The Express Tribune because they reoriented the editorial agenda. The Nation discussed the problem in the context of national safety and political stability. The News International was a bit more institution-based in terms of accountability and dedicated less to editorials. Although some of these varied, all the four outlets covered the issue of electoral delay as the main theme, which shows that the issue was of national interest, and also, it is of cross editorial concern in that case.

## **5.2 Dominant Themes in Editorial Narratives**

1. Factors contributing to the Delay- amongst the factors include the effect the 2023 census has on the delay of the elections, the security issues, and logistical problems.
2. Constitutional and Legal Implications -with special regards to Article 224 and the issue of judicial intervention in overseeing the elections.
3. Political Party Views - differences in accounts by the PTI, PMLN, and other stakeholders on the substance of the delay, its illegitimacy and legality.
4. Democratic Issues and Community Attitude- as seen in editorials, there were serious concerns over a decline in civic spirit, decline of democratic values and weakening faith of the populace in the state institutions.

Long-Term Political Consequences – including fears of institutional decay, democratic backsliding, and the dangerous precedent of manipulating constitutional deadlines.

The thematic analysis of editorial content from *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* between April and November 2023 revealed five dominant themes that consistently appeared across the newspapers. These themes represent the key areas

of concern and critique within the media discourse regarding the delay of general and provincial elections in Pakistan. Each theme reflects not only institutional commentary but also the larger public discourse around constitutional governance, political accountability, and democratic integrity.

### **Reasons for Delay**

One of the most prominent themes was the justification and rationale provided for the postponement of elections. Editorials highlighted several key factors used by authorities to delay the polls:

**2023 Census:** The new digital census was cited as a major reason requiring fresh delimitation of constituencies, which would naturally push the electoral timeline beyond the 90-day constitutional limit.

**Security Challenges:** The situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Balochistan was labelled “sensitive,” with potential threats to polling stations, candidates, and voters.

**Logistical Constraints:** These included resource limitations faced by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), such as lack of staff, funding, and insufficient planning time. While census data and security concerns are real, they cannot override constitutional imperatives unless democracy itself is deemed a negotiable principle.

These factors were seen in the editorials as administrative obstacles that, though significant, should not have served as blanket justifications to override constitutional obligations.

### **Constitutional and Legal Implications**

A recurring theme in the editorials was the violation or manipulation of Article 224(2) of the Constitution, which mandates elections within 90 days of assembly dissolution.

Editorials frequently criticized the ECP's inaction, the federal and provincial caretaker governments, and even expressed concern over the judiciary's inconsistent enforcement of constitutional provisions.

Some newspapers framed the delay as a serious breach of democratic norms, setting a dangerous legal precedent that could be exploited in future elections. The ruling of the court is decided, the Constitution is clear, and still political convenience takes the cheap way out over the legal responsibility. In these debates erosion of the constitution was a fear, and editorials asked whether rule of law was exercised in a selective manner according to Ariston or political necessity.

### **Political Party Perspectives**

Newspaper editorials were also a form of reflection/analysis of the conflicting stands that political stake holders took:

Even delaying of the elections was something PTI (Pakistan Tehreek Insaf) was very vocally critical of, directly citing a plot behind it to deny them an electoral rebound.

PMLN, and their partners in the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), justified this postponement on census grounds, economic issues, and security situation.

Partisan polarization, including legalizing constitutional deadlines through political narratives, was often mentioned in the editorial.

Losing delay is theft of a mandate to PTI and strategic governance to PDM. To the masses it is confusion.

This theme also showed the process of politicizing constitutional duties in a way that the politicking was making legal utterances to be more politically expedient.

## **Public Sentiment and Democratic Concerns**

On all editorials, there was an expression of discontent of disillusionment of the populace, loss of the democratic ideals, and defiance of electoral institutions. The delays were considered to be leading to voter apathy especially among the younger people and first-time voters. Pointed out by numerous editorials was the vulnerability of democratic conventions and the danger that continual subversion of election procedures would permanently destroy popular trust in representative democracy. Every missed deadline undermines the concept of responsibility and in the near future, elections will not be regarded as a right anymore, rather it will be perceived as a luxury. The theme was an indication of a greater democratic crisis, whereby, the alienation between the state institutions and the citizenry was becoming increasingly large.

## **Long Term Political Consequences**

Lastly, most editorials contemplated on the longterm impacts of such election delays. This was not viewed as an individual setback but as a whole trend towards democratic backsliding. There were warnings in editorials of:

The risk of Precedent setting behaviour whereby future governments would postpone elections on similar pretexts. Institutional corruption more so concerning the Election Commission and the courts. Political instability was raised with insecurity over the possibility of the decline of electoral justifications that may trigger mass protests, civil unrest, or a military takeover worst case scenario.

## **Conclusion of Theme Analysis**

Not only was there explicit criticism and reflective consideration on the editorial discourse in the four newspapers but also on the varying political circumstances. The tone and the emphasis differed depending on the outlet, but there was universal alarm regarding the

effects of the delay on the democracy of Pakistan. The themes disclose a media space that, in a more general sense, largely recognises the threats along the way of dismissing constitutional requirements and violating the belief of people.

### **5.3 Sentiment and Linguistic Framing**

Sentiment analysis showed that most of the editorial coverage was negative in nature, especially when it focused on failure on the part of the institution, political opportunism and legal grey areas. Imperial neutralities were captured in analytical articles and positive feelings were scarce and generally restricted to appeals to constitutional clarity or institutional reform.

Editorial coverage of the above-named publications i.e. Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, The News International, during April and November 2023, has been played out with a negative sentimentality indicating that the media has been largely concerned about the consequences of the election delay. Whereas neutral toning was present in data driven or explanatory works, positive sentiment was also distinctive and limited to calls to constitutional order and institutional reform.

#### **Prevalence of Negative Sentiment**

Most editorials were negative and were in many cases aimed at:

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP): due to perceived administrative ineptitude and compliance failure of the Article 224(2) of the Constitution.

The caretaker governments/ political coalitions (particularly PDM): on the charge of using the legal and logistical loopholes to postpone elections to get political advantage.

The judiciary: due to what was perceived as a lack of consistency with regards to the enforcement of constitutional deadlines, further added to the lack of confidence in the judicial field by way of the citizens. Common negative expressions included terms such as: Constitutional violations, Manufactured delay, Political manoeuvring, Institutional decay,

Demolition of democratic trust. These lexical patterns reflect a sentiment that interprets the delay not as a procedural necessity, but rather as a deliberate and harmful disruption to democratic norms.

### **Neutral Sentiment in Analytical Commentary**

A smaller portion of editorials took on a neutral or balanced tone, especially in analytical pieces focused on:

- The technical requirements of delimitation based on the new census.
- The logistical burden on the ECP.
- The potential security threats in certain regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

These editorials avoided overt blame or praise, instead opting for factual exposition and policy-oriented suggestions. Newspapers like *The Express Tribune* were more likely to adopt this balanced approach, using measured language such as

While the constitutional mandate is clear, operational realities complicate immediate enforcement. The need for national security cannot be ignored, though it must be weighed against constitutional obligations, and Neutral sentiment pieces aimed to inform rather than persuade, and they often sought to contextualize the crisis within broader governance challenges.

### **Limited Positive Sentiment**

Positive sentiment was least frequent across all outlets. When present, it typically appeared in the form of optimism for institutional reform: highlighting opportunities for the ECP, judiciary, or legislature to learn from the crisis and strengthen constitutional mechanisms. Support for legal clarity: welcoming Supreme Court interventions or parliamentary discussions

aimed at resolving ambiguity. Calls for political unity and dialogue: a few editorials lauded to bring stakeholders to the negotiating table.

Such tones were often buried within predominantly negative discussions, suggesting that while hope exists for reform, it is largely overshadowed by prevailing scepticism.

### Linguistic Framing Patterns

Across the newspapers, specific linguistic devices were frequently used to shape reader perception.

Device	Example Phrases	Function
Emotive language	“Betrayal of democracy,” “constitutional sabotage”	Evokes urgency and moral alarm
Passive constructions	“Elections were delayed due to security”	Obscures agency or assigns vague responsibility
Judicial/legal references	“Violation of Article 224,” “against Supreme Court orders”	Enhances legitimacy of criticism
Metaphors and analogies	“Democracy on life support,” “slippery slope of legality”	Simplifies complex issues for dramatic effect
Balanced qualifiers	“While the intent may be justified...”, “Although logistical needs...”	Introduces nuanced discussion

Table 21 Language Framing patterns

This framing reinforced the priming effect (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), subtly steering readers to interpret the delay through a lens of democratic erosion or governance failure.

### Sentiment Distribution

Newspaper	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Overall, Tone
<i>Dawn</i>	70%	25%	5%	Predominantly Negative
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	60%	35%	5%	Mixed / Analytical
<i>The Nation</i>	65%	25%	10%	Critical & Reformist
<i>The News International</i>	75%	20%	5%	Strongly Critical

Table 22 Sentiments distributions

### Interpretive Insight

The predominance of negative sentiment and critical linguistic framing suggests that the media functioned as a watchdog, voicing concerns over governance, constitutionalism, and

democratic backsliding. However, the limited appearance of constructive or solution-oriented narratives also reflects a media landscape shaped more by critique than by reform advocacy.

## 5.4 Word Frequency and Code Coherence

The word frequency tables aligned strongly with thematic codes. Repetitive use of terms like “constitution,” “delay,” “democracy,” “court,” and “voters” signaled a shared vocabulary of crisis, law, and democratic accountability. This linguistic cohesion across outlets suggests a converging narrative of concern despite editorial differences in tone or emphasis.

The quantitative textual analysis of editorial data from the four selected newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* revealed strong alignment between frequently occurring lexical items and the preestablished thematic codes. This convergence illustrates not only consistency in narrative framing but also the existence of a shared linguistic schema employed across diverse editorial perspectives.

### High Frequency Terms Reflect Thematic Priorities

Among the corpus of the data, one could find a number of keywords that were repeated quite frequently. These included:

High Frequency Word	Associated Code/Theme
Constitution	Constitutional and Legal Implications
Elections	General Political Crisis / Delay
Delay	Logistical / Political Hurdles
Democracy	Public Sentiment and Democratic Concerns
Court	Judiciary Oversight / Legal Framework
Voters	Public Trust and Democratic Norms
ECP	Institutional Failure
Article 224	Legal Specificity of the Election Delay
May 14	Missed Deadlines / Judicial Order
Crisis	Institutional Decay / Political Fallout

Table 23 High Frequency Terms Reflect Thematic Priorities

These lexical habits testify to the fact that editorial interests were concentrated on the issue of violation of constitutional deadlines, the place of legal institutions as well as the overall effect on democratic management.

### **Linguistic Cohesion Across Newspapers**

Nevertheless, although the newspapers may have differed ideologically and stylistically, they shared in lingual comparisons to an extent how the delay was addressed. For example:

Terms such as constitutional crisis, electoral integrity and judicial mandate were posted everywhere in *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune*, whereas similar words and phrases such as *legal violation, mandate breach and governance failure* were used in *The Nation* and *The News International*.

The term voter disenfranchisement and erosion of trust were virtually synonymous to demonstrate the dissatisfaction on the part of the people.

There is an indication here of a convergent vocabulary of institutional scepticism, albeit that the tones (reformist The Nation to alarmist at Dawn) also varied.

### **Code Coherence and Keyword Density**

Using thematic coding NVivo or manual grounded coding techniques, the study found that each major code was supported by clusters of associated vocabulary, indicating coherence between conceptual categories and actual linguistic usage.

#### **Example of Theme Based Word Clustering:**

Theme	Frequent Words
Constitutional and Legal Issues	Constitution, Article, Court, Law, Judicial, Mandate, Rule, Section
Political Party Narratives	PTI, PMLN, PDM, Opposition, Government, Coalition, Candidate

Theme	Frequent Words
Logistical Constraints	ECP, Staff, Census, Delimitation, Preparation, Infrastructure
Public Trust & Democracy	Voter, Turnout, Apathy, Trust, Crisis, Democracy, Confidence
Institutional Roles	Commission, Chief Justice, Election Date, May 14, Orders

Table 24 Theme Based Word Clustering

This semantic alignment strengthens the credibility of the thematic interpretation, as the frequency and clustering of words reflect the recurrent ideas the media consistently sought to emphasize.

### Shared Vocabulary, Divergent Framing

While word frequency was consistent across the board, editorial framing:

*Dawn* and *The News International* frequently used the term "*constitutional mandate*" in a normative tone, framing delays as violations.

*The Express Tribune*, in contrast, used the phrase more contextually, relating it to legal complexities and administrative capability.

*The Nation* often framed the same issues through a reformist lens, using terms like "*learning opportunity*" and "*need for institutional reform*."

This indicates that while the language remained similar, the interpretive slant varied, which is consistent with framing theory and the agenda setting role of media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

### Implications for Media Narratives

The recurrence and coherence of key terms such as "*constitution*," "*delay*," "*court*," and "*voters*" across different media outlets suggest a collective editorial acknowledgment of the

gravity of the election delay. These shared lexical items act as discursive anchors around which narratives of governance, accountability, and legality are built.

Such linguistic convergence implies that, regardless of political leanings, the media discourse surrounding the election delay was underpinned by common democratic concerns chiefly, the erosion of trust in institutions, the threat to constitutional continuity, and the uncertainty surrounding the electoral roadmap.

## **5.5 Divergence in Narrative Strategy**

While *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* adopted an institutional legal lens, grounding their criticism in constitutional mandates and Supreme Court rulings, *The Nation* and *The News International* tended to focus on pragmatic political rationales and broader governance challenges. These two lines reflect the overall editorial identity because some of these outlets focus on a discourse of flaw in rules, whereas others are more concerned with political realism.

One of the most interesting things having emerged as the result of qualitative thematic analysis of editorial coverage in *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* is the difference in terms of narrative strategy employed by the respective outlets. Though all the four newspapers covered the issue on the election delay and its implications to democracy, each of them provided their reportage with different scope of the editorial prism that suggested ways the positioning in the institution, ideology, audience of the newspaper occurred.

### **Legal Institutional Framing: *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune***

The *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* editorials were marked by a problem in the rule and the constitutionalist discourse, which are based mostly on the legal precedent and judicial power. These media houses also often referred to Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan

that requires that within 90 days after the dissolution of an assembly, elections are to be carried out.

In these newspapers, there are such phrases as:

- Breaking of constitutional mandate
- Binding orders by Supreme Court
- Democratic backsliding by institutional inertia

appeared recurrently. The delay was however not only framed in terms of a political failure but in terms of erosion of constitutional order. These editorials pointed out the normativeness and legal compulsion required by state institutions such as Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the judiciary to implement electoral deadlines.

This style of comments represents liberal democratic style of editorial, politically where accountability, institutional firmness and constitutional devices are at the core of policy commentary. In Dawn, the critiques took a non-consultative, harsh tone that was also quite morally prescriptive, whereas The Express Tribune had a more administration- and law-related critique layering the readership with two levels of criticism.

#### **Pragmatic Political Framing: *The Nation* and *The News International***

The News International and The Nation, on the contrary, took on a more realistic and pragmatic approach. Although these newspapers failed to overlook constitutional issues, they put the delay into a bigger context like:

The practical situation defeats the constitutional theory

Delays are unfortunate but built out of necessity in the logistics of things.

Consensus elections are safer to avoid additional instability

The criticality was not so accusatory but rather explanatory and mostly aimed at the viability of governance and strategic stability. This is realpolitik editorial position which considers statecraft and practicality of functioning in preference over legal absolutism.

### **Reflecting Editorial Identities and Institutional Priorities**

Such a disparity of framing in the stories could be viewed as an indicator of an editorial character of two outlets:

Newspaper	Narrative Focus	Editorial Identity
Dawn	Legal and constitutional compliance	Liberal, democratic watchdog
The Express Tribune	Institutional mandates and judicial activism	Policy oriented and centrist legal critique
The Nation	Political negotiation and governance reform	Nationalist realist, politically grounded
The News International	Operational constraints and consensus building	Moderate pragmatist, reformist centrist

*Table 25 Editorial Identities and Institutional Priorities*

This plurality of opinions points to the fact that the media in Pakistan is heterogeneous and the media houses and various editorial boards treat the state of affairs differently spanning their concerns to maintaining the ideals of normative democracy to accommodative politics and pragmatic limitations.

### **Implications of Divergent Framing**

- It widens the discussion in the society and introduces the readers to the diversity of interpreting the same political event.
- It brings out the array of competing functions that can be discharged by the media as watchdog, mediator, educator, or stabilizer.
- It changes reader sentiment in a variety of ways even legal framing can arouse civic panic, but political framing can usher in resigned cynicism or even in acceptance.

Despite this difference, however, a common interest in democratic stability and institutional integrity creates a thread of unification. That indicates that the frames are different, whereas the concern of the alarm over the deterioration of the democracies is shared.

One of the major conclusions of the qualitative thematic analysis conducted on editorial coverage of the newspapers across Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, The News International is that the narrative strategy represented by each of these media outlets is different. Even though all of the four newspapers covered the delay in the election and its democratic consequences, they did it by means of different editorial approaches which demonstrated how institutional location, ideological disposition, and target audience influenced their construction of the crisis.

#### **Legal Institutional Framing: *Dawn* and *the Express Tribune***

The editorials of Dawn and The Express Tribune were typified by the rule flaw and constitutionalist discourse, which relied mainly on the legal precedent and the judicial power. Such media houses came often quoting Article 224(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan, which provides that elections should be carried out within 90 days after the dissolution of an assembly.

appeared recurrently. This was further depicted as a failure to act on time not of politics but of constitutional order. In these editorials the normative and legal necessity of state institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the judiciary with enforcing electoral deadlines was highlighted.

The policy is based on a liberal democratic editorial attitude, which places accountability, institutional power, and compliance with constitutional structure at the center of discussion of politics. The critique sound in Dawn was very moralistic and even stern, whereas The Express Tribune brought other levels to the legal analysis and administrative critique.

### **Pragmatic Political Framing: *The Nation* and *The News International***

The Nation and The News International in turn took a more practical and political realism-based course. Although these newspapers did not overlook the constitutional concerns, they put them into perspective as they were surrounded by the greater challenges

It was less accusing, more explanatory, frequently oriented to viability of governance and strategic stability. This is an example of realpolitik editorial attitude, during which the policy-guiding strategic statecraft and operation efficacies are more important than legal absolutism.

### **Reflecting Editorial Identities and Institutional Priorities**

Such a difference in the “framing” of the narratives can be explained as another way of indicating the editorial culture of the outlets:

Newspaper	Narrative Focus	Editorial Identity
<i>Dawn</i>	Legal and constitutional compliance	Liberal, democratic watchdog
<i>The Express Tribune</i>	Institutional mandates and judicial activism	Policy oriented and centrist legal critique
<i>The Nation</i>	Political negotiation and governance reform	Nationalist realist, politically grounded
<i>The News International</i>	Operational constraints and consensus building	Moderatepragmatist, reformist centrist

*Table 26 Editorial Identities and Institutional Priorities*

Such disparity in the outlooks highlights the fact that the media in Pakistan is not homogenized and that the editorial boards hold different functions that include serving the normative ideals of democracy as well as filtering political scenarios and rationalizing limitations inherent to institutes.

### **Implications of Divergent Framing**

The difference in the editorial framing is essential, it opens the discussion to the wider audience, making them be exposed to various interpretations of the same news in politics. It shows the rivalrous role of media: watchdog, mediator, educator, or stabilizer. It affects reader feeling in different ways legal framing may cause civic alarm, political framing may cause resignation or the view that this is the way things are. This divergence notwithstanding, there is also a thread of similarity characteristic by the common interests to promote democratic stability and integrity of the institutions. This implies that the frames are different, but the reason as to why there is a certain fear of descent of democracy is shared.

### **5.6 Democratic Implications**

The most disturbing of all conclusions of the editorial climate perhaps is the fact that constitutional flexibility in the rein of political expediency has become the norm. The delays that have been postponed alternatively as a matter of necessity or illegality point to the fact that the norms of democracy in Pakistan are still weak when subjected to crisis discourse. Unless limited by powerful institutional structures, this flexibility may lead to some permanent damages done to democratic procedures.

Among the most troubling and significant findings of this study, is the fact that this has resulted in a gradual normalization of the flexibility in the Pakistani constitution within Pakistan politics and media rhetoric. The editorial commentaries in the four major dailies; Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International, reveal that the delay of the election process though much talked about and debated is becoming more a case of necessary truce or a case of allowance in political or logistic hardship. This is highly concerning with regard to the health and the sustainability of democratic traditions in the nation.

## **Erosion of Constitutional Certainty**

The core of the democratic system in Pakistan is Article 224(2) of Constitution that states that within 90 days after the latest dissolution of any assembly, elections should be made. Nevertheless, there has not been an across-the-board critical outcry on this lack of compliance with this need as the number of Supreme Court decisions make it necessary, as the editorial coverage indicates. Otherwise, in trying to report the violation, the newspapers used to put it in the form of:

This rhetorical treatment has left ambiguity on what is mandatory within the constitution and what can be bargained upon in politics. This indecisiveness compromises the principle of the rule of law whereby there is opportunity of applying the constitutional requirements selectively, based on political conveniences.

## **Crisis as a Justification for Constitutional Breach**

The often-repeated theme in the editorials was that of crisis narratives, instabilities in the economy, security threats, delays to the census collection, or polarizations in the politics to invoke the threat of violation of the democratic timelines. Although these facts are evidently important, the fact that they are used on a regular basis to justify the delay in the electoral tasks is a damning precedent: Crises are increasingly becoming a means rather than an end.

It gives rise to deliberate manufacturing of crisis, or strategic delay, when those in control may seek to secure their power base by finding loopholes in the institution to avoid accountability or survival itself.

## **Public Trust and Voter Disillusionment**

A few editorials were acutely worried about the loss of the faith of citizens in the electoral process and in the whole idea of democracy as such. Many have seen the failure to hold timely elections particularly after courts intervene as an indicator of weakness of

institutions or executive excess. This disappointment threatens to undermine civic participation which is the most important foundation of a functioning democracy. When the democratic processes become more or less predictable or manipulative citizens can start doubting the usefulness of participation which again puts them further outside the political scene.

### **Weakening of Democratic Institutions**

Another issue associated with several editorials is about the institutional weakness that was revealed by the postponement of elections. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) as well as the judges and the caretaker governments were each at one point or another seen to be either hesitant or to be part of the actual hold up. The question of institutional response asynchrony brought to question:

- the independence of the ECP
- Sterility of the judicial conclusions
- Responsibility of temporary governments

This weakness that is perceived by institutions leads to the undermining democratic protection, and the democratic system becomes more prone to the force of authoritarianism or elite capture.

### **Normalization of Constitutional Flexibility**

The worst implication can be perhaps the growing appeal to constitutional elasticity. The editorial casting of legalistic, pragmatic, and neutral editorial frames represents a cultural trend in which a violation of the constitution is simply discussed, instead of being condemned. Such normalisation might generate a slippery slope in which:

- Deadlines become guidelines
- Laws become negotiable
- Democratic principles are sacrificed for short-term political convenience

Unless counterbalanced by strong civic activism, robust judicial enforcement, and media accountability, this trend threatens to institutionalize a flexible, elite controlled democracy one where power, not principle, dictates electoral timing.

## **5.7 Final Reflections**

The media discourse analysis confirmed that the problem of the delayed elections in Pakistan cannot be only analyzed as a problem of the date's arrangement, but a very deep structural problem of the state. Through judicial instability to political clashing and lack of confidence, an era of democratic ambiguity is summed up collectively by the editorials. They are also a blueprint of reform, a blueprint that focuses on clarity from the interpretation of the constitution, institutional autonomy, and re-commitment to democratic continuity.

The present media discourse analysis clearly confirms that the problem of delayed election in Pakistan cannot be related just to the question of logistics rescheduling but it is a prism through which structural, constitutional and democratic susceptibilities of the state machine is made visible. The editorial discourses of four mainstream dailies titled Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International painted a very complicated scenario of institutional malfunction, hidden political ambition as well as defunct desire in the people.

### **Beyond Calendar Dates: Elections as Democratic Ritual**

Although seemingly the topic of the debate was the delays in the electoral schedules, in the editorials, the idea that elections are not just simple administrative exercises was quite evident. They are ceremonies of democratic Renewal, enshrined in the Constitution, without which legitimacy could not exist, and representational of state responsibility. The pattern of postponement of such rituals even after being reminded by the judiciary and the letter of the constitution indicates the consistency of the weakness in the system in which the political expediency replaces the constitutional dictate.

The inability to conduct the elections within 90day time, particularly after the dissolution of assemblies of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Supreme Court directions reveal a major crisis of enforcement and accountability. It is this failure as recorded by the editorials, which not only reflects administrative inertia but rather a methodical rearrangement of priorities in democracy with electoral integrity relegated to the side of political expediency.

### **Judicial Ambiguity and Institutional Paralysis**

Among the essential thoughts generated by the editorial discussion is the uncertainty in the task of the judiciary to support the Constitution. Although the Supreme Court of Pakistan did issue orders requiring elections, there were no mechanisms of enforcement, contradicting interpretations, and institutional resistance on the part of the Election Commission and executive divisions of the government that diluted the effect of legal decisions.

This insensibility between the power of the courts and their practice was often attacked in the press, and whether the institutions of Pakistan have the freedom and the desire to serve ideal principles of democracy under political pressure, was repeatedly questioned. This is one weakness in the form of ambiguity of roles and responsibilities that threatens the continuity of democracy.

### **Political Confrontation and Democratic Stalemate**

The polarized political environment was another theme, where significant parties (especially PTI and the ruling PDM coalition) turned the situation around the delay of the elections into an arena of the battle of narratives. Rather than large-scale consensus building or through institutional coordination, we witnessed an increase in mutual accusation, to the point of potentiating any meaningful dialogue and reform.

According to the editorials, this politics of antagonism not only hampered the process of electoral planning but it had also affected the confidence of the people in the very idea of a

free and reasonable elections. Where politics becomes a zero-sum game, the democratic contract between state and citizen erodes, giving rise to alienation, apathy, and extremism.

### **Media as Democratic Barometer**

While diverging in tone and emphasis, all four newspapers expressed either explicitly or implicitly alarm over the state of democracy in Pakistan. The media, in this context, functioned not only as a reflector of public sentiment but as an active participant in shaping democratic discourse.

Their editorial warnings serve as a collective institutional memory, documenting how constitutional flexibility, unchecked executive discretion, and partisan calculation have distorted the electoral landscape. The press, thus, acts as a crucial watchdog, offering both critique and reform proposals.

### **A Blueprint for Reform**

The editorial landscape offers more than diagnosis it provides a blueprint for democratic recovery:

- Clarify Constitutional Interpretation: There is an urgent need for clear, unambiguous mechanisms to enforce election related constitutional provisions.
- Strengthen Institutional Independence: The Election Commission, judiciary, and caretaker governments must operate autonomously, free from political influence.
- Depoliticize Crisis Narratives: Structural problems such as census delays or security issues must not be politicized to justify constitutional breaches.
- Rebuild Public Trust: Civic education, transparency, and open media engagement are essential to counteract growing voter apathy and disillusionment.

- Codify Electoral Timelines: Through legislation or judicial reform, Pakistan must institutionalize non-negotiable electoral deadlines, insulating them from executive manipulation.

### **Conclusion: Democracy in Transition**

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that democracy in Pakistan remains in a transitional phase fragile, contested, and deeply susceptible to elite interests. Yet, the vibrancy of editorial critique suggests that civil society and independent media still possess the resolve to demand accountability and transparency.

The question moving forward is not merely when elections are held, but under what conditions. Without reforms that anchor elections in rule of law, institutional integrity, and civic engagement, electoral delays will continue to symbolize a broader retreat from democratic values.

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