

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Politics of Electoral Alliances in Pakistan: A Case Study of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, Pakistan (MMA)

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Abstract: Political parties in a multi-party system either form a pre-electoral alliance to contest the election from a single platform under a single election symbol or, contest the election independently or constitute a post-electoral alliance to establish a coalition government afterwards. The religious political parties soon after the birth of Pakistan showed a unique sense of solidarity in their ranks and files to convert the nascent state of Pakistan into an Islamic state. Unfortunately, during the electoral history of Pakistan (1970–1997), these parties, for one reason or another, failed to constitute a viable electoral alliance. The incident of 9/11 and the subsequent American attack on Afghanistan brought six religious political parties close to each other in the form of the Pakistan-Afghan Defence Council (PADC), and later on, the PADC was converted into an electoral alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal. These parties contested the general election of 2002 under the umbrella of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, with Book as an electoral symbol. This research paper describes and analyses the factors that led to the formation of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal. This paper also investigates the factors responsible for the victory of the MMA in the general elections of 2002.

Keywords: Electoral Alliance, Religious Political Parties, PADC, MMA, Election 2002

Introduction

Electoral alliances are political agreements between political parties to pursue a shared and common agenda to achieve a minimum common goal or objective through a joint action (Mustafa, 2010). Each of the parties within the alliance has its own policies but chooses temporarily to set aside differences in favour of common goals and ideology in order to pool their voters' support and get elected. An electoral alliance may be formed by parties with very different policy goals that agree to pool resources in order to stop a particular candidate or party from gaining power. Electoral alliances are the essence of democracy, in which the voters choose their representatives through elections (Danielsen, 2023). In a two-party system, the victorious party forms the government, while the losing party is relegated to the opposition benches. In multi-party systems, no single party can win a majority of seats to form the government. The necessary majority to form a political alliance may normally occur in two phases. One pre-electoral alliance occurs before the elections and is made openly with the goal of informing the public about what the parties will do if they win enough seats. A post-electoral alliance is formed after the elections when the final distribution of seats or votes is known (Karume, 2003).

Because Pakistan's society is divided along linguistic, regional, religious, and ethnic lines, alliance politics have long been the dominant factor of the country's democratic system. Regional, linguistic, religious, and ethnic politics create opportunities for the nation to adopt a multi-party system (Boucek, 2010). Therefore, pre- and post-electoral alliances are strongly encouraged. It is difficult for a single political party to contest an election and form a government in Pakistan on its own strength and resources. (Binder, 1961).

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Having their roots in pre-partition India, the majority of religious parties were adamantly against the two-nation theory, which served as the foundation for Pakistan's movement. Soon after the establishment of Pakistan, the religious political parties began to turn the newly born state into an Islamic one (Nawaz, 2020). To declare Qadiani a non-Muslim minority and remove Zafar Ullah Khan, the Ahmadiyya Foreign Minister, from his position, the religious and political parties under the umbrella of the All-Muslims Party Action Council (AMPAC) launched an anti-Ahmadiyya movement in the early days of the birth of Pakistan (Azhar & Muhammad, [2015](#)).

After the enforcement of the Constitution of 1956, religious-political parties resolved to participate in electoral politics and decided to contest the upcoming elections. However, the long-awaited general elections could not be held and were postponed several times for one reason or another reason, and martial law was proclaimed on October 7, 1958 (Zafar & Javaid, [1960](#)). From the presidential election of 1965 to the general elections of 1990, religious political parties have been a part of different electoral and non-electoral alliances with secular political parties (Khan, [2011](#)). These parties failed to forge their own electoral alliance to meet their agenda of Islamization of the Constitution and the polity of Pakistan (Checa, n.[Checad.](#)).

The general elections of 1993 marked another endeavour for electoral alliances, yet religious parties faced challenges in forming a viable electoral alliance. JUI (F) and JUP (N) managed to create the Islami Jamhoori Mahaz (IJM), while Qazi Hussain Ahmad established an electoral wing of JIP, Pakistan Islamic Front (PIF). Mawlana Sami-ul-Haq, with the collaboration of smaller religio-political parties, formed an electoral alliance, Muttahida Deni Mahaz (MDM). Despite efforts to amalgamate various alliances into a grand coalition, success remained elusive (Zahra & Iqbal, [2021](#)). The growing sectarian violence had not only shaken the very foundation of Pakistan but also posed a serious threat to the agenda of Islamization of religious political parties. In order to curb the growing menace of sectarianism and terrorism in Pakistan, Qazi Hussain Ahmad (late), the political and non-political religious parties under the banner of Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) in 1995. Initially, it was a non-electoral organization that played an effective role in curbing and reducing sectarian violence in Pakistan (Weinbaum, [1977](#)). Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the founder of the council, wanted to convert it into an electoral alliance of religious political parties. Unfortunately, this idea could not materialize, and the council disintegrated because of the difference between the two constituent parties of the alliance, JUI (F) and JUI (S), over the distribution of portfolios (Ahmad, [2015](#)).

The incident of 9/11 and the subsequent American attack on Afghanistan brought six religious political parties close to each other in the form of the Pakistan-Afghan Defence Council (PADC), and later on, the PADC was converted into an electoral alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (Khan et al., [2021](#)). These parties contested the general election of 2002 under the umbrella of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, with Book as an election symbol. The MMA not only formed the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) from 2002–2007 but also entered into a coalition government with the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) in Baluchistan, influencing social, political, and structural changes. This was the first golden opportunity for Islamist parties to implement their election manifesto.

Theoretical Framework

Professor William H. Ricker's alliance theory (1962) delves into the dynamics of political alliances within multi-party systems, particularly when no single party can secure a majority to form a government independently. In such scenarios, political parties often engage in pre-electoral or post-electoral alliances to consolidate their electoral strength. Ricker's theoretical framework delineates various models of alliances, shedding light on the strategic manoeuvres undertaken by political actors. Central to Ricker's analysis is the concept of the Minimum Winning Alliance, which involves the smallest number of parties joining forces to attain a parliamentary majority. This alliance formation can occur either before or after elections, depending on the political landscape. Conversely, an oversized alliance encompasses a greater number of political parties, which may collaborate either in electoral campaigns or in post-election negotiations to establish governmental

control. In elucidating the role of ideology in alliance politics, Ricker introduces the concept of the minimum connected alliance theory. This type of alliance consists of political parties situated next to each other on the ideological spectrum. By focusing on ideological proximity, Ricker highlights how cohesive alliances can be forged among parties sharing similar policy orientations. Applying Ricker's theoretical framework to the context of Pakistan's electoral landscape, particularly in analysing the politics of the electoral alliance within the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), underscores the significance of the Minimum Connected Alliance Theory. Within the MMA, comprising religiously orientated parties, the dynamics of alliance-building were influenced not only by electoral calculations but also by ideological affinity. Understanding the interplay between ideological cohesion and electoral strategy is crucial in comprehending the intricacies of electoral alliances within the context of Pakistan (Fedder, [1968](#)).

Formation of Mttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)

The global political landscape, reshaped by the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centre, profoundly altered global politics and had a lasting impact on Pakistani politics and those of its neighbours (Hussain, [2018](#)). In retaliation, US-led coalition forces attacked Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Though the government of Pakistan, under the pressure of the Bush administration, took a U-turn on Afghan policy and offered logistic support to the USA in her war against terror, religious and political parties and Jihadists resisted the official stand and launched a widespread street protest against the US intervention in Afghanistan (Akbar, [2019](#)). A consortium of 35 religious, political factions and Jihadi entities collectively established the Pak-Afghan Defence Council (PADC) with the purpose of opposing the official stance of the government and expressing their solidarity to the then-ruling Taliban administration in its resistance against the United States (Afridi et al., [2016](#)).

On November 15, 1999, the constitutionality of the Martial Law imposed in October 1999, the Proclamation of Emergency, and the Provisional Constitutional Order issued on October 14, 1999, were challenged before the Supreme Court of Pakistan through various petitions filed by Syed Zafar Ali Shah, Wasim Sajjad, Ilahi Bux Soomro, Raja Zafar-ul-Haq, and Chaudhry Pervez Ilahi on behalf of PML (N) under Article 184(3) of the Constitution of 1973 (Yamin, [2015](#)). These petitions were duly entertained, and a hearing was scheduled for January 30, 2000. A twelve-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, headed by Chief Justice Irshad Hassan Khan on May 12, 2000, validated the coupe of 1999, invoking the 'Doctrine of State Necessity' in the case of Syed Zafar Ali Shah vs General Pervez Musharraf (Alam et al., [2020](#)). The court granted a three-year timeframe to the Musharraf government to fulfil its agenda and subsequently transfer power to an elected government. Moreover, the court authorised the martial law regime to enact essential constitutional amendments (Ahmed, [2015](#)). In accordance with the Supreme Court's verdict, General Pervez Musharraf, on July 11, 2002, scheduled general elections to be held on October 10, 2002 (Ahmed, [2015](#)). Following the announcement of the general elections, an electoral alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), was formed by six prominent religious and political parties of the Pak-Afghan Defence Council (PADC). The constituent parties included Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (JIP) led by Qazi Hussain Ahmad, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) headed by Mawlana Fazal-ur-Rehman, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam(S) of Mawlana Sami-ul-Haq, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan led by Mawlana Shah Ahmad Noorani (JUP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Ahle Hadith by Prof. Sajid Mir (JUAH), and Islami Tehrik Pakistan (ITP) of Syed Sajid Ali Naqvi. Mawlana Shah Ahmad Noorani and Mawlana Sami-ul-Haq were elected by consensus as the President and Vice President of the alliance, respectively (Zafar & Ali, [2018](#)).

Election Manifesto of Mttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) for General Elections, 2002

The MMA released a comprehensive fifteen-point election manifesto encompassing its political, social, economic, and religious programs (Khan, 2014). Important aspects of the manifesto included the establishment of an Islamic system of justice with freedom for the judiciary and press, the application of

Sharia Law based on the recommendations of the Council of Islamic Ideology, and a dedication to the accountability of rulers, elected officials, the judiciary, and the army (Zafar & Ali, [2018](#)). The manifesto also assured basic necessities for all citizens: compulsory education up to the 8th grade, uniform and speedy justice, and the creation of an independent, just, and humane economic system (Khan, [2011](#)). Other priorities involve ending exploitative taxation, protecting women's rights as per Islam, emphasising provincial autonomy, and devolving powers to grassroots levels. The MMA advocates for a God-fearing, helpful, brave, and protective police system, abolishing feudal systems, providing land to peasants, and ensuring fair prices for their produce (Kanwal, [2019](#)). The manifesto also calls for liberation from imperialistic influences and extending support to suppressed nations, notably focusing on Kashmir, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Chechnya (Malik, [2014](#)).

Election Campaign

A campaign for an election is a planned attempt to sway public opinion in support of a candidate or political party. Campaigns in nations with weak democratic traditions tend to focus more on opposition, using derogatory propaganda and personal assaults on opposing parties, even though they are usually planned to showcase a party's political agenda (Begum, [2022](#)). The general elections of 2002 were fiercely fought as a referendum between the anti-US and pro-US political parties. By using its anti-American stance and the promise of the Islamisation of society, the MMA leadership effectively mobilised the public throughout the campaign, particularly in Pashtun-dominated areas (Waseem, 2005). The MMA leaders repeatedly reaffirmed their support for Shariah law implementation, press and judicial freedom, and other common social issues during the campaign (Khan, [2011](#)). The MMA's leaders, who criticised the government's war on terror policies, were instrumental in establishing the narrative and mobilising popular support for the electoral alliance (Qazi, et al., [2024](#)).

Analysis of the Electoral Process and Election Results of the Elections, 2002

The fairness of the 2002 elections in Pakistan generated controversy within political circles, with opposition parties accusing General Musharraf of engaging in pre-election and post-election rigging to favour the king party Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) and the National Alliance (NA) (Rais, October 19, 2002). Allegations included political pressure exerted on politicians to align with PML(Q), strategic transfers of bureaucrats in favour of the ruling party, and the instrumental use of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to influence defections from prominent political parties such as the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (N) in favour of PML(Q), the official party of martial law administration. The military regime was also purportedly involved in shaping a favourable narrative for PML(Q) in the media, particularly on the state-run Pakistan Television (PTV).

According to reports from the Commonwealth Observer Group, PML(Q) received more airtime on PTV's news bulletin, with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) being the second beneficiary (EU election observation mission to Pakistan in 2002, October 5, 2005). The Election Commission of Pakistan faced criticism for allegedly campaigning for PML (Q) by featuring its symbol in sample polling advertisements. Additionally, PML(Q) enjoyed the active support of provincial chief ministers, chief secretaries, and certain officials of local government and provincial governor offices, serving as de facto "campaign cells" for the party (Bahadur, [2006](#)). Independent observer groups and media outlets observed indications of electoral rigging by the military regime. International observers, including the International Crisis Group (ICG) from the United States, deemed the October 2002 elections deeply flawed, citing serious irregularities (Khan, [2010](#)). The European Union's Election Observation Mission noted a failure of the Election Commission of Pakistan to assert its independence and observed instances of public infrastructure misuse during the electoral process. Parties aligned with the military government allegedly made promises of future development projects during their campaigns. The mission held the government responsible for significant irregularities in the elections

(Waseem, [2005](#)). The Commonwealth Observers Group expressed satisfaction with the Election Day proceedings but raised concerns about the fairness of the election, asserting interference in electoral arrangements and the democratic process, leading to substantial irregularities (Zubair, [2015](#)). Observers from the European Union highlighted the pronounced impact of the Musharraf regime on the electoral process during the October 2002 elections. In contrast, the spokesperson for the US State Department, Richard A. Boucher, offered a simple welcome to the election results without probing into the observed irregularities (Zubair, [2015](#)).

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) contested 183 out of 272 seats in the National Assembly. The MMA won 45 general seats, and its representation reached 59 members in the 342-member National Assembly after computing reserved seats for women and minorities. A significant concentration of electoral success for the alliance was observed. In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), it secured 29 out of 35 National Assembly seats (Shah, [2008](#)). At the provincial level, the MMA demonstrated considerable strength by becoming the predominant party in the KP assembly, securing 48 out of 99 seats. With the inclusion of independents and reserved seats for women and minorities, the MMA's representation expanded to 68 members in the 124-member assembly of the KP. Additionally, the MMA asserted itself as the principal party in Baluchistan, securing 13 seats in the provincial assembly. It is noteworthy that all elected candidates from the MMA in the provincial assembly of Balochistan belonged to the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), a party that has consistently held a substantial presence in the assembly of Balochistan since 1970 (Khan & Islam, [2023](#)). In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) emerged as the second-largest party with 11 seats, while independent candidates constituted the third-largest grouping. In the Baluchistan Assembly, the final party distribution revealed that the MMA secured 18 seats, including reserved seats and independents aligning with the coalition, compared to the 21 seats held by PML (Q) in the 65-member assembly. This electoral outcome witnessed a departure from established patterns, notably marked by the defeat of ethnic parties such as the BNP—the Baluchistan National Party—and the Jamhoori Wattan Party (JWP). However, the alliance won negligible success in Punjab and Sindh by securing 11 seats out of 297 in Punjab, which belonged to Jamaat-e-Islami, while in the Sindh Provincial Assembly, it captured 10 out of 130 general seats (Amin et al., [2013](#)).

The electoral alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), witnessed the dominance of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) and Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan as predominant constituent parties, securing a total of 50 seats in the National Assembly. In contrast, all other allied parties collectively obtained only three seats. Specifically, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (S) secured two seats, while Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP) secured one seat, and Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith did not secure any seats (Rauf & Ayaz, [2011](#)). The 2002 elections marked a watershed moment in the ascendance of religious-political parties in Pakistan, principally in the provinces of NWFP and Baluchistan. Despite the unity exhibited by the religious parties within the MMA, the alliance itself did not anticipate such a favourable response from the electorate. General Musharraf, the then incumbent, appeared to underestimate the growing support for the MMA, providing assurances to the US that the MMA would not garner more than five percent of the vote (Abbas, [2015](#)). The emergence and success of the MMA proved to be an unexpected and unwelcome development, particularly within the Western sphere and notably in the United States. This sentiment was exacerbated by the backdrop of the Taliban factor in Afghanistan. Concurrently, the US administration exerted pressure on Pakistan, urging restraint in dealing with the Taliban and their supporting entities within Pakistan. This stance persisted despite historical indications of past US support for the Taliban. The 2002 elections, therefore, unfolded against a complex geopolitical backdrop, highlighting the nuanced dynamics between the growing influence of religious parties in Pakistan and the external pressures exerted by the United States, particularly in the context of regional security considerations (Karamat et al., [2019](#)).

Factors Responsible for MMA's Success in General Elections, 2002

The events of September 11, 2001, had profound consequences for Pakistan and the global community (Qadir, January 3, 2003). The United States attributed responsibility to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, asserting

the need for Pakistan's support in countermeasures (Khan et al., [2021](#)). Prior to 9/11, Pakistan had a pro-Taliban policy, formally recognising the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The genesis of the Taliban was in religious madrasas in Pakistan's NWFP, with influential parties like Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (S) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) fostering close ties. These parties portrayed positive aspects of the Taliban regime, emphasising modest lifestyles, societal tranquillity, and expeditious justice. Pre-9/11, Pakistani citizens could travel to Afghanistan without passports, allowing outsiders to observe the Taliban's governance. As the Taliban regime neared its end, trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan increased, diminishing the Indian lobby's influence in Kabul, which pleased the Pakistani military establishment (Shahzad & Kokab, [2013](#)). The 9/11 attacks prompted Pakistan to reassess its pro-Taliban stance, aligning with the US-led coalition in the war on terror. Pakistan's quick involvement, along with intense bombardments on Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, fuelled public sentiment against the United States and the military regime in Pakistan, contributing to the electoral success of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in the general elections of October 2002 (Khan, [2014](#)).

Immediately after the catastrophe of 9/11, the Bush administration unequivocally attributed responsibility to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan, and underscored the imperative of Pakistani support for effective counteraction. President George W. Bush, in a national address, declared a lack of distinction between those who planned the attacks and those harbouring them. Addressing a White House national security meeting, US Secretary of State Colin Powell emphasised the urgency of conveying a message to Pakistan and Afghanistan that it was a pivotal moment (Khan, [2014](#)). Subsequently, Pakistan aligned itself with the US-led coalition in the war on terror in Afghanistan. The swift entry of Pakistan into this alliance, coupled with the ensuing intense bombardments and air strikes on Afghanistan, generated public dissent against both the United States and the Pakistani military regime. This dissent played a catalytic role in the electoral victory of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in the October polls (Bukhari, 2015). Anti-US sentiments escalated, particularly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan provinces, as the repercussions of the conflict manifested in the return of deceased and injured Pakistani Pakhtuns. Perceptions of US negligence towards the welfare and reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan fuelled discontent. The ascent of the Northern Alliance, supported by the US, further intensified anti-US sentiments, particularly in the KP and Baluchistan, where the Northern Alliance was implicated in the deaths of numerous Taliban and other Pakhtun prisoners. The disproportionate representation of the Northern Alliance in the post-Taliban Afghan government compounded grievances. These factors collectively amplified existing anti-US sentiments prevalent in the KP and Baluchistan provinces.

The MMA adeptly navigated the ground realities in these regions, articulating and capitalising on anti-US sentiments among the Pakhtuns. Secular nationalist parties in the KP, such as the Awami National Party (ANP), suffered significant defeats due to their perceived alignment with US military actions or their neutral stance (Rauf & Ayaz, [2011](#)). Scholar Magnus Marsden attributes the success of the MMA in the 2002 elections to growing Islamic sentiments and its opposition to General Musharraf and the US in the context of the war on terror. During the electoral campaign, leaders of religious and political parties vehemently criticised America's perceived anti-Muslim policies, urging voters to reject pro-American politicians (Shah, [2021](#)). The presence of FBI agents on Pakistani soil was portrayed as a serious threat to the country's sovereignty. The MMA strategically exploited the ongoing war in Afghanistan, characterising it as a crusade against Islam and organising nationwide public rallies and protests under the banner of Islam in danger (Waseem, [2005](#)).

Pakistan's religious demographic landscape is marked by divisions, notably between Deobandis and Barelvis within the Sunni school and the Shia school of thought. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) comprises two Deobandi factions, while the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP) aligns with the Barelvi school of thought. The Shia sect, with distinctive beliefs centred on reverence for the Holy Prophet's household (Ahl-e-Baiat), is represented by the Islami Tehrik Pakistan (ITP) within the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). In contrast, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JIP), drawing membership from urban-educated, professional, and business classes, is considered more orthodox (Rizvi, October 24, [2002](#)). The JIP serves as a unifying force, bridging diverse

religious factions under the MMA, including the Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith, associated with the Wahabi sect. This unification strategically consolidates various religious groups, overcoming historical sectarian divisions from the 1980s and 1990s. The MMA's cohesive platform fosters agreement among its constituent units on numerous issues, preventing the dispersion of votes across different factions, sects, and parties. The creation of a unified appeal, symbolised by the book, successfully garners acceptance from a previously hesitant electorate, consolidating support for the combined representation of religious parties (Waseem, [2005](#)).

The electoral victory of the MMA in the 2002 general elections was significantly influenced by several factors, with one of the primary causes being the alliance of religious parties. Before forming this electoral alliance, various events within and outside the country encouraged religious-political parties to unite under a common banner. A notable precursor to this alliance was the Deoband Conference, hosted by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) in Peshawar in April 2001, which is considered the initial phase of the religio-political parties' election campaign (Rauf & Ayaz, [2011](#)). The conference drew religious scholars and leaders from various Muslim nations, amplifying its impact with the attendance of nearly one million people. A distinctive feature of the conference was the dissemination of audio messages from Osama bin Laden and Mullah Umar, severely criticising the West for perceived anti-Muslim strategies, thereby resonating with religious sentiments in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (Karamat, [2019](#)). In the post-9/11 political landscape, the religious political parties focused on defending Pakistan and Afghanistan in response to the US attack on Afghanistan. Demonstrations and strikes were initiated to safeguard the interests of both nations, particularly in light of General Musharraf's decision to align with the Americans in the 'war against terror.' Progressing from these protests, the religio-political parties transformed their campaign into an electoral one when the government announced general elections for October 10, 2002 (Nazar, [2016](#)).

The *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA) strategically capitalised on its robust electoral approach, a factor contributing significantly to its success in the elections. The extensive utilisation of the well-established cadre network within mosques and madrasas played a pivotal role during the election campaign. These religious institutions not only provided organisational support but also wielded considerable street power for the alliance. Mosques and madrasas were effectively mobilised, operating at full capacity throughout the election campaign (Nawaz, [2019](#)). The ulama leveraged mosques as central hubs for campaigning, delivering messages in Friday sermons to rally support for MMA candidates, a resource that their opponents failed to harness. According to reports, Pakistan hosts approximately 6,000 madrasas, with 2,333 affiliated with the Deoband School of Thought, followed by 1,625 Barelvi madrasas, 224 Ahl-e-Hadith madrasas, and 163 Shia madrasas. Leaders and candidates strategically engaged students from these madrasas, leveraging their participation in organising large-scale gatherings and corner meetings. This strategic use of religious institutions and their affiliated networks significantly contributed to the MMA's electoral triumph (Nawaz, [2019](#)).

The MMA took advantage of the Election Commission of Pakistan's decision to designate a book as an election symbol in order to influence voters' opinions based on their religious beliefs (Waseem, [2005](#)). Notably, MMA candidates explicitly glorified this book as the Holy Quran, underscoring a deliberate association with religious sanctity. Throughout the election campaign, leaders and supporters of the religious parties strategically incorporated references to the Holy Quran in their Friday sermons and public speeches. Emphatically, they conveyed the message that it was incumbent upon Muslims to exercise their voting rights in favour of "the" book. The narrative cultivated by the MMA was designed to elicit an emotional and religious response, particularly targeting illiterate voters (Butt, [2022](#)). The overarching theme emphasised the imperative of casting votes in support of the MMA as a means to establish an Islamic system. The strategic messaging, disseminated through diverse channels such as posters, charts, and pamphlets designed for the election campaign, conspicuously portrayed the Holy Quran as a symbolic icon for the ballot. The declaration of the election as a fundamental battle between Islam and Kufar further accentuated the polarisation of the political landscape (Kumar, [2001](#)).

In the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) initiated its electoral campaign on dual fronts. On one tier, leaders directed their focus towards constituency-specific issues, encompassing the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, enhancement of civic facilities, provision of potable water, endeavours to ameliorate the quality of life for ordinary citizens, educational provisions for children, facilitation of employment opportunities, expansion of administrative responsiveness to public needs, and the eradication of corruption across all governmental levels (Khan, [2019](#)). On the second tier, the alliance vehemently critiqued Pakistan's political and socio-economic system, decrying its perceived inefficacy in promoting the welfare of the people. The MMA advocated for an Islamic paradigm as a viable alternative to the prevailing structure, emphasising the importance of the Quran and the Sunnah. It underscored the imperative for a comprehensive restructuring of the present political and socio-economic order in alignment with Islamic principles (Khan, [2019](#)).

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) secured a substantial victory in the Pakhtun-dominated constituencies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan. In KP, the MMA overwhelmingly got 27 out of 29 National Assembly seats, with the remaining two seats going to the PPP (Shepao Group) through a pre-electoral seat adjustment (Khan, [2019](#)). Notably, the MMA exhibited superior electoral performance in Pakhtun regions of Baluchistan, specifically Zhob, Pashin, and Loralai, compared to Baluch-dominated areas. Additionally, the MMA demonstrated noteworthy results in the Pakhtun population of Karachi. The prominent Pakhtun leaders within the MMA, such as Mawlana Fazlur Rehman, Mawlana Sami-ul-Haq, and Qazi Hussain Ahmad, were Pashtuns who wielded considerable influence in Pashtun-dominated constituencies (Khan, [2019](#)). Their adept understanding of the Pakhtun electorate's psyche enabled effective communication, with the leaders addressing the voters in their native language. Against the backdrop of the Afghan conflict and its aftermath post-9/11, a perception emerged that the war disproportionately affected the Pakhtun community (Zubair, [2015](#)). This perception, coupled with the return of Pakhtun fighters from Afghanistan and the deep fraternal ties with the Afghan public, stimulated anti-US and anti-government sentiments among Pakhtun voters. The failure of Pashtun-nationalist parties, such as the Awami National Party (ANP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Pashtun nationalist parties in Baluchistan, to secure voter support during the election campaign can be attributed to their endorsement of anti-Taliban operations. This factor, in turn, facilitated the electoral gains of religious parties in the Pakhtun belt. The complex dynamics of the war on terror, coupled with the religious leaders' adept navigation of the sentiments prevailing in Pakhtun constituencies, underscored the multifaceted factors contributing to the MMA's electoral success (Zubair, [2015](#)).

The landscape of electoral politics in Pakistan is knottily woven around the personalities and leaders of political entities. Notably, leaders of prominent political parties, such as the PPP and PML-N, found themselves subject to diminished esteem due to allegations of corruption, embezzlement, nepotism, and bad governance. The people attributed their grievances and exploitation to the self-serving policies of these major political entities (Khan, [2014](#)). Exploiting the apparent inadequacies of these parties, the leaders of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) strategically positioned themselves as champions of the Pakistani people during the electoral campaign. The tarnishing of the image of established political parties by the MMA leaders, marked by a perceived lack of integrity, significantly eroded their image among the electorate. This erosion of credibility not only undermined the legitimacy of traditional political parties but also served to bolster the image of religious leaders within the political arena (Pasha & Muhammad, [2016](#)). "The substantial voter turnout in favour of religious parties represents a noteworthy departure from historical trends. This shift in voter sentiment is not confined to the conventional rural demographic but extends to encompass the urban and professional classes, signifying a discernible inclination towards religious political entities" (Khan, [2024](#)).

Mainstream political parties and politicians found themselves either discredited or forfeited their positive standing among the populace, primarily due to their perceived inability to fulfil public expectations. Widespread disillusionment with these political entities prompted a collective desire for transformative change in both the political and administrative domains. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), distinguished

by its skilful electoral campaign strategy and large-scale public gatherings in prominent cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi, successfully garnered substantial public attention and support for its election manifesto (Nawaz, [2019](#)).

The government implemented a new policy for the eligibility criteria of electoral candidates through the Chief Executive's Order (No. 7, 2002). Accordingly, a candidate must have a bachelor's degree in any subject to be eligible for election to the Parliament or a provincial assembly. Notably, religious parties were accommodated by recognising the degree of Shahadat al-Alamiya, issued by religious seminaries, as equivalent to a bachelor's degree from a university (Nawaz, [2019](#)). This provision allowed religious parties to nominate candidates in each constituency who met the stipulated educational criteria for participating in elections. This order, resulting in the disqualification of veteran politician Nawab Zada Nasrullah Khan, the leader of the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD), and other seasoned politicians on various grounds underscored the impact of the 2002 electoral rules, which notably favoured religious political parties (Asif et al., [2021](#)).

Since the establishment of Pakistan, despite internal differences among religious political parties, there has been a consistent call for Islamization. The Pakistani people have expressed a strong desire for Shariah, yet this yearning lacks a unified platform. In a notable development during the 2002 general elections, religious political parties jointly embraced a shared agenda centred around the implementation of Shariah (Asif et al., [2021](#)). This marked a historic moment in Pakistan's electoral landscape, as leaders of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) mobilised the masses, encouraging them to vote in favour of Shariah and actualise this collective aspiration. Throughout the electoral campaign, there was a sustained critique of previous governments' policies, with the accusation that they had overlooked the persistent demand of the public for the implementation of Shariah (Asif et al., [2021](#)).

Since assuming power through a military takeover in October 1999, Pervez Musharraf has embarked on a campaign to eradicate religious extremism and champion enlightened moderation. Following his alignment with the international coalition against terrorism post-September 11, 2001, Musharraf gained recognition as a reformist and secular leader on the global stage (Asif et al., [2021](#)). However, the need for legitimacy loomed not only internationally but also domestically, where he grappled with the perception of being a military dictator and usurper. The avenue to legitimise his rule was perceived to be through elections in Pakistan. Musharraf chose to implement the strategy of his military predecessors to counter the potential challenges posed by the main political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). This strategy entailed establishing tactical alliances with religious parties to confront his primary political adversaries (Martin & Picherit, [2020](#)). During an extended three-hour meeting with Qazi Hussain Ahmad, Amir of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Musharraf expressed his resolve to impede the PPP's resurgence to power and urged all anti-PPP forces to unite. The perceived threat posed by Nawaz Sharif's PML was mitigated by its fragmentation, with Musharraf orchestrating the creation of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) under the leadership of Choudhry Shujaat Hussain, a former interior minister in Nawaz Sharif's government. This strategic move played a pivotal role in diminishing the influence of the PML-N and consolidating Musharraf's grip on power (Martin & Picherit, [2020](#)).

The October elections orchestrated by the Musharraf regime were marked by strategic manoeuvres aimed at securing parliamentary representation for preferred political parties, particularly those aligned with the military regime. The anti-regime political parties, notably the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), raised grievances regarding electoral malpractices during the election process (Martin & Picherit, [2020](#)). Substantiating these complaints, the European Union Observers Mission (EUEOM) acknowledged instances of official intervention favouring the pro-government 'King's Party,' specifically the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), and, to a certain extent, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), both before and on the day of polling. The PPP objected that in September, before the elections, 140 election

officers were transferred and posted, which traditionally conferred advantages upon the incumbents in the political landscape of Pakistan (Misra, [2003](#)). Prior to the elections, the PPP preemptively alleged pre-poll rigging and expressed apprehensions that religious parties would receive preferential treatment. The ban on political activities was lifted on September 1, 2002, just one month before the conduct of general elections, thus providing little time for the election campaign. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was allowed to conduct the election campaign, even in Rawalpindi, near the GHQ, while the PPP and PML(N) were denied similar permissions for public gatherings. Unhindered by government restrictions, on August 28, 2002, the MMA initiated a train march from Karachi to Lahore to Peshawar. Furthermore, religio-political parties utilised mosques as platforms to openly engage with their constituencies on political matters (Misra, [2003](#)). This multifaceted electoral landscape underscores the nuanced dynamics and potential irregularities that characterised the 2002 electoral process. The MMA crafted its election manifesto with in-depth thought. It focused on the principal problems and miseries of the people and avoided controversial issues. Pervez Musharraf had a dominant role in the election process, so it wisely avoided criticising him too much. Recognising the MMA's conciliatory stance, General Musharraf displayed a preference for the alliance, leading to its exemption from various restrictions that were applied to other political parties, notably regarding the holding of public rallies (Khan, [2014](#)).

Conclusion

The religious political parties in Pakistan have been working in close harmony on different political and religious issues since the birth of Pakistan. They struggled for the Islamisation of Pakistan, which was the sole aim of the creation of Pakistan. Unfortunately, they, for one reason or another, failed to form an electoral alliance and contested elections either independently or in alliances with secular political parties. The MMA was the first electoral alliance among the religious political parties in the electoral history of Pakistan. Before the 2002 general elections, some incidents inside and outside of Pakistan took place, which paved the way for unity among the religious parties. The Deoband Conference, organised by JUI-F in Taro Jabba in April 2001 and attended by almost all religious personalities from inside and outside of Pakistan, created a sense of unity among the religious circles of Pakistan. The incident of 9/11 and the subsequent American attack on Afghanistan were sharply reacted to by these parties. Thirty-five religious parties and Jehadi organisations formed PADC, and through this platform, they expressed their solidarity with the government of the Taliban. Following the announcement of the October 2002 general elections, six religious, political parties formed Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal as a pre-electoral alliance to contest the election. The religious parties launched an organised election campaign under the banner of the MMA and got a glaring victory both in the National Assembly and in the two provincial assemblies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Unity among the ranks of the Deoband, Barelvi, and Shia schools of thought, anti-American sentiments, the book (the Quran) as an election symbol, the absence of popular leadership (Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto) from Pakistan, and the popular election manifesto greatly contributed to the victory of the MMA in the general elections of 2002.

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