

Ayub Khan's Convention Muslim League: A Strategy For Political Control

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1601>

Abstract

The Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) (PML-C), established by General Ayub Khan in 1962, played a pivotal role in the political landscape of Pakistan. Formed in the aftermath of Ayub Khan's military coup, the PML-C was an instrument to consolidate his regime and gain political legitimacy. Operating within the framework of Ayub's Basic Democracy system, it sought to offer a semblance of democratic representation while reinforcing authoritarian control. The party's role was central to the 1965 presidential elections but failed to establish a lasting political base due to lack of grassroots support. This study examines the PML-C's formation, its dependence on state resources, and its eventual decline as a case study in the limitations of military-backed political entities. It also explores the broader implications of authoritarianism and political engineering in Pakistan, highlighting the challenges faced by such parties in maintaining political stability and legitimacy. Using qualitative methods, including historical analysis and political discourse, this research provides valuable insights into the rise and fall of the PML-C, contributing to a deeper understanding of Pakistan's political history and the role of military influence in shaping its democratic processes.

Key words: Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) (PML-C), Ayub Khan, Military coup, Basic Democracy system, Authoritarianism, Political legitimacy

Introduction

The political history of Pakistan has been marked by periods of military intervention, with the first direct military rule established by General Ayub Khan in 1958. Following the imposition of martial law, Ayub Khan sought to consolidate his power by restructuring Pakistan's political landscape. A significant aspect of this strategy was the creation of the Convention Muslim League (CML) in 1962, a political party designed to provide a civilian façade to his military-backed rule. Unlike the original Pakistan Muslim League (PML), which had played a crucial role in the country's independence, the CML was formed with the explicit aim of supporting Ayub Khan's policies and legitimizing his regime through a controlled democratic system. The establishment of the Convention Muslim League was not merely an attempt to revive an old political entity but rather a calculated move to institutionalize Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies System, introduced in 1959. This system was designed to centralize power while giving the illusion of grassroots representation. By

aligning the CML with this system, Ayub Khan ensured that the political process remained under his control, sidelining opposition parties and preventing the re-emergence of traditional political forces. The new party became the vehicle through which Ayub Khan contested and won the 1965 presidential election against Fatima Jinnah, a contest widely regarded as manipulated in favor of the ruling regime.

The formation of the CML was also a response to the fragmented nature of Pakistan's political opposition. By bringing together bureaucrats, industrialists, and politicians loyal to his administration, Ayub Khan created a party that functioned more as an extension of his government than as an independent political organization. The CML was heavily dependent on state patronage, benefiting from government resources and administrative support while suppressing dissent. This patronage system allowed Ayub Khan to maintain control over Pakistan's political and economic elite, ensuring that the party remained dominant as long as his government was stable.

This research article aims to explore the formation, structure, and role of the Convention Muslim League as a tool of political control under Ayub Khan. It will analyze how the party functioned within the framework of controlled democracy, how it was used to suppress opposition, and why it ultimately failed. By examining the CML's rise and fall, this study will contribute to a broader understanding of the intersection between authoritarianism and political party formation in Pakistan's historical context.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to analyze Ayub Khan's Convention Muslim League as a political tool for consolidating power and controlling Pakistan's political landscape.

Sub-Objectives

- To analyze how Ayub Khan used the CML to maintain political control.
- To examine the role of the CML in the 1965 presidential election.
- To assess the impact of the CML on Pakistan's political history.

Research Questions

1. How did Ayub Khan use the CML for political control?
2. What was the CML's role in the 1965 election?
3. How did the CML impact Pakistan's political history?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of Ayub Khan's Convention Muslim League (CML) and its role in shaping Pakistan's political landscape. It highlights how the CML was used as a tool for political control, influencing elections and governance under Ayub Khan's regime. By examining the party's formation, function, and decline, this research contributes to the broader discourse on military-backed political engineering in Pakistan. Additionally, the study offers insights for researchers, historians, and political analysts in understanding authoritarian influences on party politics. It also helps policymakers and scholars assess the long-term implications of state-controlled political parties on democratic development in Pakistan.

Sources and Methodology

The study titled "Ayub Khan's Convention Muslim League: A Strategy for Political Control" is qualitative in nature, employing analytical and descriptive approaches to examine its findings. Data is collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include official government records, Ayub Khan's speeches, policy documents, and election

reports that highlight the role of the Convention Muslim League (CML) in Pakistan's political system. Secondary sources consist of books, research papers, journal articles, and newspaper publications analyzing Ayub Khan's political strategies and the impact of the CML. Additionally, interpretations by historians, political analysts, and scholars are examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of the party's formation, function, and decline.

Review of Literature

Lawrence Ziring, *the Ayub Khan Era: Politics in Pakistan, 1958-1969* (1971)

Lawrence Ziring provides a comprehensive analysis of Ayub Khan's political strategies, including the formation and role of the Convention Muslim League (CML). The book discusses how Ayub Khan used the CML to consolidate power and implement his Basic Democracies system, which gave an illusion of democracy while maintaining military control. Ziring critically examines the role of the CML in sustaining Ayub's rule and its eventual decline after his resignation in 1969.

Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan Under Ayub Khan, 1960-1969* (1980)

Burki's work explores the political and economic policies of Ayub Khan's regime, highlighting the role of the CML as a state-backed political party. He discusses how Ayub Khan relied on the CML to contest elections, particularly the 1965 presidential election against Fatima Jinnah, and how the party functioned as a controlled political entity rather than a genuinely popular movement. The book also sheds light on the factors that led to the weakening of the CML, including growing opposition and public unrest.

Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan* (1986)

Rizvi examines the broader role of the military in Pakistan's political system, with a specific focus on Ayub Khan's rule. He discusses the creation of the CML as part of Ayub's strategy to provide a civilian façade to his authoritarian rule. Rizvi argues that the CML's dependency on state patronage and lack of grassroots support made it unsustainable in the long run. He also assesses how the military's involvement in politics set a precedent for future military-backed political parties in Pakistan.

Zahid Hussain, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan* (2007)

Zahid Hussain critically evaluates how military rulers, including Ayub Khan, manipulated political institutions to maintain control. He examines the role of the CML in legitimizing Ayub Khan's rule, while also discussing its weaknesses, such as internal factionalism and lack of public support. Hussain also draws comparisons between the CML and later military-backed parties in Pakistan's political history.

Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within* (2008)

Shuja Nawaz's work provides an in-depth analysis of the Pakistani military's influence on politics, including Ayub Khan's rule. He discusses the CML as a political instrument designed to control elections and suppress opposition. Nawaz also assesses the impact of Ayub Khan's political engineering on Pakistan's future democratic struggles, arguing that the failure of the CML demonstrated the limitations of state-controlled political parties.

Political Context of Ayub Khan's Era

1. Military Rule and Constitutional Reforms

The political context of Ayub Khan's era (1958-1969) is characterized by the rise of military rule following the 1958 coup d'état, which ousted the civilian government of Iskander Mirza. Ayub Khan, then the Chief of Army Staff, took control of the government after Mirza abrogated the 1956 Constitution and declared martial law. Ayub Khan's rise marked a significant shift in Pakistan's political landscape, as the country transitioned

from a parliamentary democracy to military rule. Upon assuming power, Ayub Khan argued that the country needed a strong, centralized government to bring stability to a nation still grappling with political instability, economic challenges, and regional tensions. He justified the military intervention as a means of "saving the state" from political fragmentation and ineffective governance. Initially, Ayub Khan promised to restore democratic governance, but instead, he entrenched his control through a series of reforms that effectively consolidated his power.

The most significant of these reforms was the introduction of the 1962 Constitution, which replaced the 1956 Constitution and established a presidential form of government. This Constitution granted the president extensive powers, including the authority to dissolve the national assembly, appoint ministers, and exercise control over the military and judiciary. In effect, the Constitution codified an authoritarian political structure, sidelining the parliament and political parties in favor of presidential centralization. The political system established by Ayub Khan was described by many as a "military oligarchy" because of the prominent role the military played in governance.

2. The Basic Democracy System

In 1959, Ayub Khan introduced the Basic Democracy system, which was a local government model designed to strengthen his control over political life while bypassing traditional political institutions. The system was structured around a network of local councils that allowed Ayub Khan to maintain political legitimacy by involving citizens in the governance process. The councils, however, were tightly controlled and designed to ensure loyalty to the central government rather than the development of independent political structures. The Basic Democracy system had two major features. First, it established union councils at the village level, which were responsible for basic local governance and the implementation of government policies. Second, it created electoral colleges that selected representatives for provincial and national assemblies. While the councils allowed Ayub Khan to present the image of a participatory political system, they were actually designed to serve as a means of controlling local politics and ensuring that only those loyal to the regime were elected.

Ayub Khan's strategy with the Basic Democracy system was to maintain popular support while undermining opposition forces. The system was a way for him to create a "controlled democracy", which gave the appearance of political engagement without allowing for genuine political pluralism. The government could control the process by regulating who could run for election and what policies could be discussed. In many ways, Basic Democracy acted as a buffer between the central government and grassroots political movements, preventing the rise of powerful political parties that could challenge Ayub Khan's authority. Ayub Khan's military-backed autocratic rule led to initial stability and economic growth, it also sowed the seeds of political unrest. His centralized control alienated many political elites, including those within the Muslim League, who were dissatisfied with his monopolization of power. Additionally, the growing urban-rural divide, along with his unpopular policies, led to rising dissatisfaction, especially among the working class and students, who felt excluded from the political process.

Formation of Pakistan Muslim league (Convention)

The Pakistan Muslim League (Convention), also known as the PML (C), was a political faction formed in 1962 during the military rule of Ayub Khan. This formation was part of a broader strategy by Ayub Khan to consolidate his power and secure political legitimacy for his authoritarian regime. The roots of the PML (C) can be traced back to the decline of the original Muslim League after Pakistan's independence in 1947. While the Muslim League was the dominant force in the independence movement under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, after his death in 1948, the party struggled to maintain its unity. It was weakened by internal divisions, and the political turmoil of the early years of Pakistan's existence further contributed to its fragmentation. By the time Ayub Khan came to power in 1958 through a military coup, the Muslim League was no longer the significant political force it had once been. In the aftermath of the 1958

coup, Ayub Khan, as the Chief Martial Law Administrator, gradually moved to replace civilian political actors with a more centralized and controlled regime.

Ayub Khan's 1962 Constitution formally replaced the earlier 1956 Constitution and introduced a presidential system of governance, centralizing authority in the office of the president, which further marginalized traditional political parties. Under these conditions, Ayub Khan sought to establish a pro-regime political party that could support his military-backed government and serve as a loyal tool for the consolidation of power. This led to the formation of the Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) in 1962. The PML (C) was composed primarily of pro-Ayub political figures, military officers, and bureaucrats who supported the president's vision of national stability, economic progress, and centralized governance. It was a faction of the broader Muslim League, representing those who aligned themselves with Ayub Khan's policies, and it aimed to provide a unified political platform that would help solidify his rule. Key figures in the formation of the PML (C) included individuals like Feroz Khan Noon, a former prime minister, and other prominent Muslim League members who sought to secure their political future under Ayub's rule. While the Muslim League had historically been the party of Pakistan's founding fathers, by the early 1960s, the party had fractured into various factions, many of which were critical of the military regime. The PML (C), on the other hand, provided a space for those who were loyal to Ayub Khan and wanted to work within his framework of authoritarian governance. Ayub Khan's agenda for the country, which was largely reflected in the party's platform, revolved around modernization, economic development, and national unity, with an emphasis on industrialization, centralized government control, and authoritarian political structures that were embodied in the Basic Democracy system.

The PML (C) was intended to be more than just a political party; it was a key part of Ayub Khan's strategy to legitimize his military regime and gain popular support for his presidential system. The party was heavily reliant on state patronage and the support of the military and bureaucratic elites. However, despite its official formation and the backing it received from the regime, the PML (C) struggled to gain genuine public support. The Basic Democracy system, under which local elections were held to elect representatives to the National Assembly, was criticized as undemocratic and overly controlled by Ayub's regime. Though the system appeared to offer political participation, it was widely seen as a mechanism to restrict genuine democratic competition and to marginalize opposition forces. The PML (C) became more of a vehicle for Ayub Khan's personal rule than a platform for political pluralism, as it was heavily manipulated to serve the interests of the military government.

Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) as a tool for Political Control

The Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) (PML-C) was established in 1962 as a pro-government political party under Ayub Khan's regime. Unlike traditional political parties that emerge from grassroots movements or ideological commitments, the PML-C was primarily a state-sponsored entity designed to consolidate Ayub Khan's control over the political landscape of Pakistan. It functioned as an instrument of political control, ensuring that the political system remained loyal to the Basic Democracies framework and the presidential system introduced under the 1962 Constitution. The creation of PML-C allowed Ayub Khan to maintain a firm grip on power by sidelining opposition parties and ensuring that all political processes aligned with his government's interests.

One of the most significant ways the PML-C exercised political control was through state patronage. The party relied heavily on government resources to maintain its influence. Ayub Khan ensured that only those who supported his policies were allowed to contest elections under the Basic Democracies system. This system limited political participation by granting voting rights to only 80,000 Basic Democrats, who were government-selected representatives rather than the general public. The manipulated electoral process allowed Ayub Khan and the PML-C to maintain a firm grip over political power, sidelining opposition forces. Government officials, civil servants, and business elites who aligned with Ayub Khan's regime received state

favors such as economic incentives, government contracts, and political appointments. This network of patronage created an environment where political survival depended on loyalty to the PML-C. Opponents of the party faced political repression, and many opposition leaders, including Fatima Jinnah, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were either harassed, imprisoned, or restricted in their political activities.

The 1965 presidential election was a defining moment for the PML-C's political control. Ayub Khan contested the election against Fatima Jinnah, who was supported by the Combined Opposition Parties (COP). However, the election was held under the Basic Democracies system, where only a select group of voters (Basic Democrats) could cast their votes. The government used its administrative machinery to manipulate the election in favor of Ayub Khan. Reports of electoral rigging, coercion, and unfair practices were widespread. Despite strong public support for Fatima Jinnah, Ayub Khan was declared the winner. This controversial victory further discredited the PML-C, as it was seen as a party that could not win elections without state backing and electoral manipulation. The elections exposed the lack of genuine public support for the regime and fueled political resentment against the ruling party.

The PML-C's political control also extended to state institutions, ensuring that key government bodies aligned with Ayub Khan's policies. The bureaucracy, military, and judiciary played a significant role in maintaining Ayub Khan's grip on power. The bureaucracy was packed with loyalists, and civil servants were encouraged to support the government's political agenda. Many bureaucrats were rewarded with positions within the PML-C, further blurring the lines between state and party. Similarly, the military remained a pillar of support for the regime, ensuring that any opposition movements were swiftly suppressed. The judiciary also played a role in legitimizing the government's actions, with court rulings often favoring the administration. This institutional control ensured that opposition forces had little room to challenge the government, making it easier for the PML-C to maintain its dominance.

By the late 1960s, anti-Ayub protests intensified, with students, political activists, and opposition parties joining forces to demand democratic reforms. The 1968-69 protest movement proved to be a turning point. Widespread demonstrations, strikes, and civil unrest made it increasingly difficult for Ayub Khan to govern. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967, quickly gained popularity, presenting itself as a strong opposition force against the PML-C. Similarly, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, gained significant support in East Pakistan, further undermining Ayub's authority. The situation reached a breaking point in March 1969, when Ayub Khan was forced to resign, handing over power to General Yahya Khan. With Ayub's resignation, the PML-C lost its primary source of power and quickly disintegrated, marking the end of its role in Pakistan's political landscape.

The PML-C's political control was primarily maintained through state patronage, electoral manipulation, institutional dominance, and suppression of opposition forces. However, its lack of genuine grassroots support, increasing economic inequalities, and growing opposition movements led to its decline. The party's failure demonstrated that authoritarian political structures, when dependent on state machinery rather than popular support, are inherently unstable. The fall of the PML-C in 1969 marked the end of Ayub Khan's controlled democracy, paving the way for a new era in Pakistan's political history.

Electoral Performance and Political Decline of the Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) (PML-C)

The Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) (PML-C) was initially created as a political platform to legitimize Ayub Khan's rule, but its survival was closely tied to his authoritarian government. While it enjoyed initial success due to state patronage and the controlled political environment, its electoral performance and eventual decline revealed its lack of independent grassroots support. The 1965 presidential election was the first major test for the party, where Ayub Khan contested against Fatima Jinnah, backed by the opposition alliance known as the Combined Opposition Parties (COP). The election was conducted under the Basic Democracies system, which limited public participation by allowing only 80,000 Basic Democrats to vote. Despite widespread

public support for Fatima Jinnah, Ayub Khan won the election, though allegations of rigging and electoral manipulation tainted the legitimacy of his victory. The election exposed the party's weaknesses, as it was increasingly perceived as a state-backed entity rather than a genuine political force.

The 1965 Indo-Pak war further weakened Ayub Khan's government and, by extension, the PML-C. While the military conflict ended in a stalemate, the signing of the Tashkent Agreement between Pakistan and India led to widespread public dissatisfaction. Many Pakistanis, particularly in the military and political opposition, believed that Ayub Khan had compromised Pakistan's war gains through a diplomatic settlement. The agreement sparked protests, with opposition leaders, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, openly criticizing the government. As public discontent grew, the PML-C lost credibility, as it was seen as merely an extension of Ayub's authoritarian rule. The party failed to establish its own political identity beyond serving as a vehicle for the ruling elite.

By 1968, opposition movements, student protests, and growing economic discontent led to widespread demonstrations against Ayub Khan and the PML-C. The Agartala Conspiracy Case, which accused Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other Bengali leaders of plotting secession, further inflamed political tensions, particularly in East Pakistan. At the same time, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto broke away from the PML-C and founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which quickly gained popularity among students, workers, and leftist intellectuals. The PML-C was increasingly sidelined, as it lacked mass support and was heavily dependent on Ayub Khan's rule. The protests of 1968-69 escalated into a nationwide movement, forcing Ayub Khan to resign in March 1969. With his departure, the PML-C effectively collapsed, as it had no independent leadership or public backing to sustain itself.

The 1970 general elections confirmed the PML-C's political irrelevance. The party performed poorly, as it was overshadowed by new dominant forces, particularly the Awami League in East Pakistan and the PPP in West Pakistan. The elections demonstrated that the PML-C was a state-manufactured political entity that could not survive in a competitive democratic environment. The party completely failed to connect with voters, and its defeat marked the end of its influence. With the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh, Pakistan's political landscape transformed, and the PML-C disintegrated permanently. Many of its leaders either joined other factions of the Muslim League or retired from politics altogether.

Conclusion

The Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) was a pivotal political instrument in Ayub Khan's strategy to consolidate his military rule and create an appearance of democratic governance in Pakistan. By forming the PML (C) in 1962, Ayub Khan sought to legitimize his authoritarian regime under the guise of a controlled political party, using it to secure his grip on power, especially in the wake of his introduction of the Basic Democracy system. While the party played a significant role in sustaining Ayub's political agenda, particularly during the 1965 presidential election, it ultimately failed to gain genuine popular support due to its reliance on state patronage, suppression of opposition, and lack of grassroots mobilization.

The downfall of the PML (C) in the late 1960s, coupled with the political unrest of that period, highlighted the limitations of military-backed political entities in maintaining long-term stability. The failure of the party and the subsequent resignation of Ayub Khan in 1969 marked a significant turning point in Pakistan's political history, signaling the end of an era of military rule and the beginning of a more competitive and, eventually, democratic political environment. The legacy of the PML (C) offers a valuable lesson in the risks associated with political engineering and underscores the importance of genuine democratic participation in fostering political legitimacy.

In essence, the PML (C) served as both a tool of political control and a symbol of the challenges faced by military regimes in Pakistan, reminding us that political power rooted solely in coercion and state manipulation cannot replace public legitimacy. The party's failure underscored the inevitability of popular resistance against authoritarian structures, paving the way for the rise of opposition forces like the Pakistan

Peoples Party, which would shape Pakistan's political future.

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