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Patronage, Power, and Plurality: Biradari-Based Political Competition and the Transformation of Party Politics in a Southern Punjab Frontier District, Bhakkar (2008–2018)

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Abstract

This article examines how biradari-based factional competition shaped, and was reshaped by, party politics in Bhakkar, a Saraiki-speaking Thal district on the Punjab–Khyber Pakhtunkhwa frontier, across the general elections of 2008, 2013, and 2018 and the local government elections of 2015–16. Drawing on constituency returns for the district's two National Assembly seats, census data, official notifications, assembly proceedings, and contemporaneous press reporting, it argues that party politics in Bhakkar was transformed not by the displacement of kin-based factions by programmatic parties, but by the factions' mastery of the party label itself. Two durable coalitions, the Nawani-led Awami Mahaz and the Dhandla-led Khidmat Mahaz, treated tickets as portable and tradable instruments, moving between independent status, the PML-N, and the PTI while retaining largely stable vote bases. At the same time, the district's plurality of sect, tribe, and sub-regional identity prevented any single faction from achieving hegemony and produced, in 2018, a territorial equilibrium between the two coalitions. Patronage competition in Bhakkar is better described as party-mediated factionalism than as party-system consolidation.

Key Words: Bhakkar; Biradari; Patronage; Electoral Politics; Punjab; PML-N; PTI

Introduction

Bhakkar rarely appears in the historiography of Pakistani politics. It is a district of 1,647,852 people at the 2017 census, formed out of Mianwali in the early 1980s, whose territory runs from the Indus riverine tract into the Thal desert.[1] Yet its peripheral position makes it unusually instructive for a question central to Pakistan's democratic experience: how do kin-based networks of patronage interact with national political parties once parties become the vehicles through which state resources and legislative power are distributed?

Between 2008 and 2018 the district's two National Assembly constituencies were won under three different labels: independent, Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The labels, however, tell less than the names. Four men, Rashid Akbar Nawani, Muhammad Afzal Dhandla, Sanaullah Mastikhel, and Abdul Majeed Khanankhel, were the principal contenders in nearly every National Assembly contest of the decade, and each of them stood under at least two different party labels.[2] This article takes that pattern as its problem. It asks what was actually transformed in Bhakkar's party politics, the factions or the parties, and what role the district's social plurality played in limiting or enabling that transformation.

The argument has three parts. First, biradari-based factions in Bhakkar are best understood as durable, family-led coalitions that treat party affiliation as a resource to be acquired, traded, and discarded according to the logic of access to state power. Second, the decade's "transformation" of party politics consisted largely of changes in the party of power to which these factions attached themselves (the PML-Q in 2002, the PML-N from 2008, the PTI in 2018), together with a rapid expansion of the electorate, rather than the emergence of programmatic voting. Third, plurality, understood as the coexistence of sect, tribe, and sub-regional identity within a single district, acted as a constraint on faction-building and produced a territorial equilibrium rather than the dominance of one network.

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The study rests on constituency returns for the National Assembly seats as compiled from Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) results, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) census tables, official notifications and Punjab Assembly proceedings, and contemporaneous reporting in *Dawn*, the *Express Tribune*, *Business Recorder*, *The News*, and the digital outlet *Lok Sujag*.[3] The evidence is uneven. Reliable constituency totals exist for the general elections, but provincial and local results are patchier, and no source enumerates biradari membership. The analysis therefore proceeds from electoral outcomes and documented alliances rather than from a census of kin groups.

Biradari, Patronage, and Party: A Framework

The scholarship on rural Punjab has long treated the biradari as the basic unit of political mobilization.[4] Alavi's influential distinction between a horizontal biradari of kin who regard one another as equals and the vertical ties that bind unequal clients to patrons explains why kinship can simultaneously supply solidarity and hierarchy.[5] Eglar's study of reciprocal gift exchange (*vartan bhanji*) showed how such obligations are materially reproduced in everyday life.[6] Wilder's study of electoral behaviour in the Punjab examined how kin and local-influence considerations figure in voters' choices alongside party.[7] Their historical depth is established by Gilmartin and Imran Ali, who show how colonial administration made rural intermediaries (landlords, tribal chiefs, and *pirs*) the indispensable brokers of political order in the Punjab, a logic that survived into the electoral politics of the Pakistani state.[8] Comparative theories of clientelism sharpen the analysis. Scott's classic account defines patron-client ties as asymmetrical exchange relationships in which protection and access are traded for loyalty.[9] Kitschelt and Wilkinson show that clientelism is a mode of democratic accountability in its own right, in which citizens' votes are traded for targeted benefits rather than programmatic commitments, while Stokes and her co-authors place brokers, the intermediaries who monitor and mobilize local networks, at the center of that exchange.[10] Chandra's notion of a "patronage democracy," in which the state controls a large share of scarce jobs and services, explains why voters in such systems treat identity as a head count indicating who is likely to deliver.[11] For Pakistan, Mohmand shows that rural voters' support for dominant families is often strategic rather than merely coerced, and Javid and Martin document the persistence of landlord and religious-elite patronage in Punjab's politics.[12] Three analytical terms follow from this literature. A *faction* is a family-led coalition of biradaris and local influentials that contests elections repeatedly under a common banner. In Bhakkar the banners are explicit: the Nawani group's "Awami Mahaz" and the Dhandla group's "Awami Khidmat Mahaz."[13] *Label portability* refers to a faction's ability to move between party tickets without losing its core vote. *Plurality* refers to the coexistence within the district of sectarian, tribal, and sub-regional identities that cut across faction lines and limit their reach. Regimes also shape the incentives of such factions. Waseem's analysis of the state-centred nature of Pakistani politics and Cheema, Khwaja, and Qadir's account of the successive local government reforms both support the expectation that factions will invest in whichever tier of the state commands resources at a given moment.[14]

Bhakkar: Frontier, Demography, and the Factional Landscape

Bhakkar's population grew from 1,051,456 in 1998 to 1,647,852 in 2017, an average annual rate of 2.39 percent, across an area of 8,153 square kilometers. Only 15.76 percent of residents lived in urban areas in 2017, and the district's density stood at 202 persons per square kilometer.[15] The four tehsils, Bhakkar, Darya Khan, Kallur Kot, and Mankera, are demographically unequal: Bhakkar tehsil alone accounted for 683,939 residents in 2017, 41.5 percent of the district, while Mankera accounted for 256,895.[16] At the 2017 census 79.97 percent of residents gave Saraiki as their first language, followed by Punjabi (10.18 percent), Urdu (7.14 percent), and Pashto (2.33 percent), while 99.89 percent were Muslim.[17] The census does not enumerate sect, caste, or biradari, a limitation that makes the electoral record the principal quantitative evidence of kin-based mobilization.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Bhakkar District

Indicator	Figure
Population, 1998 census	1,051,456
Population, 2017 census	1,647,852
Average annual growth rate, 1998–2017 (%)	2.39

Indicator	Figure
Area (sq. km)	8,153
Population density, 2017 (persons per sq. km)	202
Urban population, 2017 (%)	15.76
Bhakkar tehsil, 2017 (population; share of district)	683,939; 41.5%
Mankera tehsil, 2017 (population)	256,895
First language, 2017: Saraiki (%)	79.97
First language, 2017: Punjabi (%)	10.18
First language, 2017: Urdu (%)	7.14
First language, 2017: Pashto (%)	2.33
Muslim population, 2017 (%)	99.89

Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 7th Population and Housing Census 2017: Punjab District-Wise Results; tehsil populations from the City Population compilation of PBS data; language and religion shares as reported for the 2017 census. The census does not enumerate sect, caste, or biradari.

The "frontier" character of the district is social rather than administrative. A *Dawn* editorial of October 2008 noted that Shia families fleeing sectarian violence in Dera Ismail Khan had begun settling in Bhakkar, which had itself witnessed many targeted killings and sectarian attacks.[18] More than a decade later, a local journalist observed that voters in Kallur Kot and Darya Khan, close to and kin-linked with Mianwali, were inclined to sympathise with Imran Khan, whereas the tehsils of Bhakkar and Mankera were dominated by local factions.[19] The district thus sits at the junction of the Saraiki belt, the Pashtun borderland, and Punjab's core, and its politics reflect all three. Contemporary reporting identifies a small number of families as the district's long-standing political houses: the Nawani, Dhandla, Khanankhel, Mastikhel, Shahani, Chheena, Uttra, and Niazi.[20] *Dawn* described the Nawanis in 2005 as Baloch by caste and noted that they and the Dhandlas had entered politics together in the 1970s on Convention Muslim League tickets, before becoming rivals in the party-less elections of 1985.[21] That earlier history matters because it shows that the principal rivalry of 2008–18 was inherited. It also shows that alliances were fluid: the same report recorded that the Nawanis and Shahanis had allied in the 2001 local elections, then split, with the Shahanis moving into the Dhandla camp, while in Kallur Kot the Khanan Khel family stood with the Nawanis and the Mastikhels with the Dhandlas.[22] By 2018, as discussed below, several of these alignments had reversed.

2008: The Independents' Election and Brokerage to Lahore

The general election of 18 February 2008 was won in Bhakkar by independents. In NA-73 (Bhakkar-I), Abdul Majeed Khanankhel, an independent, defeated Sanaullah Mastikhel of the PML-N by 83,850 votes to 82,740, a margin of 1,110 votes. In NA-74 (Bhakkar-II), Rashid Akbar Nawani, also an independent, defeated Dr. Muhammad Afzal Dhandla of the PML-N by 98,366 votes to 86,688 (Table 2).[23] The result contrasted with 2002, when the PML-Q had won all the district's seats; local observers attributed that success not to the new party but to the Nawani group, which had recently aligned with it.[24] In 2008 the Nawanis ran independently, and the PML-N's nominees were the Mastikhel and Dhandla candidates, the latter from a family long associated with the Muslim League tradition.[25] The independents' victory, however, was quickly converted into party affiliation. Saeed Akbar Nawani, the family's provincial candidate, had won both PP-48 and PP-49 in February, and he retained PP-49 while vacating PP-48.[26] On 2 June 2008, PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif, who went on to serve as Punjab's chief minister, was elected unopposed to PP-48 (Bhakkar-II) after the three candidates opposing him withdrew; a PML-Q candidate who had filed objections to his nomination dropped them and withdrew.[27] In February 2013 the Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, widely regarded as a front for the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba, claimed that it had withdrawn its own candidate to facilitate the election.[28] On 23 June 2008 a member of the Punjab Assembly argued that his election from a second seat in Rawalpindi had vacated PP-48, and the deputy

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speaker ruled that Sharif could retain it.[29] The matter did not end there: following a Supreme Court judgment in a petition brought by Syed Khurram Shah, the ECP de-notified Sharif from PP-48 on 25 February 2009.[30] The episode is a compact illustration of vertical brokerage. A local faction controlled a provincial seat, could vacate it at will, and could deliver it unopposed to the leader of the party that had just formed the Punjab government. The sources do not disclose what the Nawanis received in return, and this article does not speculate. What they do show is that by October 2008 *Dawn* was describing Rashid Akbar Nawani as a PML-N member of the National Assembly, with his elder brother Hameed Akbar Nawani serving as district nazim.[31] The family thus simultaneously held the National Assembly seat, a Punjab Assembly seat, and the district's highest local office, a concentration of power across three tiers that is consistent with Cheema, Khwaja, and Qadir's emphasis on the political uses of local government in Pakistan.[32]

Plurality intruded violently in the first week of October 2008, when a suicide attack targeted Rashid Akbar Nawani. A *Dawn* editorial reported at least 22 dead and over 60 injured, described the Nawanis as an influential Shia political family, and placed the attack within the district's long history of sectarian violence.[33] That a Shia-led faction could nonetheless secure majority support in a district where 99.89 percent of residents were Muslim suggests that, in electoral terms, patronage and kin loyalty outweighed sect, though the census does not allow the point to be tested directly.[34] The violence nevertheless demonstrates that biradari competition in Bhakkar was never insulated from the sectarian environment surrounding it.

2013: Disqualification, Label Swaps, and the Ruling-Party Magnet

The 2013 election was fought in the shadow of litigation. On 7 April 2013 returning officers rejected the nomination papers of Rashid Akbar Nawani (NA-74), Hameed Akbar Nawani (PP-48), and Saeed Akbar Nawani (PP-49); the *Express Tribune* noted that the family's opponents had been pursuing a fake-degree case against Rashid since 2002.[35] On 30 April a full Lahore High Court bench disqualified all three brothers in a case brought by Ghazanfar Abbas Chheena, who by 2018 would be counted in the Dhandla coalition, over the alleged fake degrees of Rashid and Saeed; Hameed's disqualification as a defaulter on government dues was upheld.[36] Legal challenge thus functioned as an instrument of factional competition, deployed by a rival-camp figure against the leaders of the opposing coalition.

The Nawani group's response was surrogate candidacy. In NA-74 a "covering" candidate, Ahmad Nawaz Khan Nawani, stood as an independent against Dhandla.[37] Dhandla won with 118,196 votes (47.96 percent) to Ahmad Nawaz's 95,246 (38.65 percent), with the PPP's Hasnain Ijaz Khan Shahani third on 13,489 (5.47 percent).[38] The vote totals are revealing. Despite the disqualification of its leader and the loss of the PML-N ticket, the Nawani camp's raw vote fell by only 3.2 percent compared with 2008 (from 98,366 to 95,246), even as total ballots polled in the constituency rose by 32.2 percent. Dhandla's vote rose by 36.3 percent (from 86,688 to 118,196). The expansion of the electorate accrued disproportionately to the rival faction, but the Nawani base held.

In NA-73 the labels reversed. Khanankhel, an independent in 2008, now carried the PML-N ticket and won with 97,688 votes (44.98 percent); Mastikhel, who had been the PML-N's nominee in 2008, now stood as an independent and took 91,068 (41.93 percent), leaving a margin of 6,620 votes. The Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen candidate, Ehsan Ullah Khan Baluch, polled 10,344 votes (4.76 percent), a sectarian-party vote that had no counterpart among the district's major factions.[39] The Election Commission's notification of 22 May 2013 returned Khanankhel and Dhandla as winners of the two seats.[40] Rejected ballots rose sharply, to 5.75 percent in NA-73 and 4.72 percent in NA-74, from 3.52 percent in both seats in 2008, a change the sources do not explain, though it coincided with a substantial enlargement of the electoral roll.[41] Table 2 sets out the six National Assembly contests. Winners in the two provincial seats are less well documented, but Chheena (PP-49) and Amir Inayat Shahani (PP-50) were reported in May 2018 as sitting members of the Punjab Assembly who left the PML-N for the PTI along with Dhandla.[42] Dhandla himself was described at that point as a PML-N National Assembly member and the Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Interior, even though he had won the 2013 seat as an independent.[43] The sequence, independent victory followed by absorption into the ruling party, replicates the pattern of 2008 and confirms that in Bhakkar the party of power attracted winners rather than producing them.

Table 2. National Assembly Contests in Bhakkar, 2008–2018

Seat	Year	Winner (label)	Votes (%)	Runner-up (label)	Votes (%)	Margin (votes)	Turnout (%)
NA-73	2008	A. M. Khanankhel (Ind.)	83,850 (48.41)	S. Mastikhel (PML-N)	82,740 (47.77)	1,110	67.43
NA-74	2008	R. A. Nawani (Ind.)	98,366 (52.11)	M. A. Dhandla (PML-N)	86,688 (45.92)	11,678	65.06
NA-73	2013	A. M. Khanankhel (PML-N)	97,688 (44.98)	S. Mastikhel (Ind.)	91,068 (41.93)	6,620	68.43
NA-74	2013	M. A. Dhandla (Ind.)	118,196 (47.96)	Ahmad Nawaz Khan (Ind.)	95,246 (38.65)	22,950	68.95
NA-97	2018	S. Mastikhel (Ind.)	120,729 (41.82)	A. M. Khanankhel (PML-N)	91,607 (31.74)	29,122	65.97
NA-98	2018	M. A. Dhandla (PTI)	138,307 (46.87)	R. A. Nawani (Ind.)	133,679 (45.30)	4,628	67.98

Sources: constituency compilations of Election Commission of Pakistan returns (NA-73/NA-97 and NA-74/NA-98), with NA-74 (2008) cross-checked against a second copy. Percentages are as reported in the compilations. NA-73 and NA-74 were renumbered NA-97 and NA-98 in 2018.

Local Government, 2015–2016: Below the Party

Local government elections were held in Punjab in three phases beginning on 31 October 2015, and Bhakkar voted in the first.[44] The press reported unofficial consolidated results of 74 seats for independents, 47 for the PML-N, and two for the PTI across the district's 64 union councils and 59 municipal committee wards.[45] Disaggregated by tier, the *Express Tribune* reported that of 66 union council chairman seats, 21 went to the PML-N, 41 to independents, and two to the PTI, with two undecided, while in the municipal committees 26 general-councillor seats went to the PML-N and 32 to independents.[46] Independents therefore took roughly 60 percent of the 123 seats counted in a district where the province's ruling party was a powerful claimant, and the PML-N's 47 seats represented about 38 percent.

Indirect elections in December 2016 consolidated the pattern: independents won the district council chairmanship in Bhakkar, as in Pakpattan, even as the PML-N swept most other district councils in the final phase.[47] This is the clearest evidence in the period that sub-district factional networks retained autonomy from parties. In 2005 *Dawn* had already observed that the Nawani and Dhandla groups collected a major share of the vote regardless of whether elections were held with or without party participation, and noted that small biradaris could become decisive in tehsils such as Kallur Kot.[48] The 2015–16 results suggest that the finding still held. The label "independent" in local contests is best read not as the absence of politics but as the formal name of the faction-based candidacy.

2018: Defection, the PTI Wave, and a Territorial Equilibrium

Ahead of the 2018 election Bhakkar's PML-N legislators moved decisively. In the third week of May 2018, Dhandla, Chheena, and Amir Inayat Shahani announced that they were quitting the PML-N for the PTI, part of a wave of defections from the PML-N to the PTI in the weeks before the election.[49] The timing and logic were those of the preceding decade: affiliation shifted before the election to the party whose national momentum promised access to state power. Their vote bases, as the results showed, moved with them.

In NA-98 (formerly NA-74) Dhandla, now on a PTI ticket, defeated Rashid Akbar Nawani, an independent, by 138,307 votes (46.87 percent) to 133,679 (45.30 percent), a margin of 4,628 votes.[50] Both camps' raw vote had grown by 2018 compared with 2013: Dhandla's by 17.0 percent and the Nawani camp's by 40.3 percent, which kept the contest a near-duopoly in which the top two candidates held 92.2 percent of ballots polled. In NA-97 (formerly NA-73) Mastikhel, standing as an independent, defeated Khanankhel of the PML-N by 120,729 votes (41.82 percent) to

91,607 (31.74 percent). The PTI's official ticket-holder, Malik Amjad Ali, polled 44,653 votes (15.47 percent) and finished third.[51] The party's own nominee was thus overshadowed by factional candidates, even as the party's symbol assisted a defector in the neighboring seat.

Provincial results suggest a striking territorial symmetry. According to *Lok Sujag*'s retrospective account, candidates backed by the Nawani group won NA-97 together with PP-89 (Kallur Kot, Amir Muhammad Hasan Khaili) and PP-90 (Darya Khan, Saeed Akbar Nawani as an independent), while the Dhandla-aligned candidates won NA-98 together with PP-91 (Mankera, Chheena, defeating an independent Saeed Akbar Nawani) and PP-92 (Bhakkar, Amir Inayat Shahani).[52] Each coalition therefore took exactly three of the district's six seats, and the division followed the boundary between the two National Assembly constituencies. Neither network achieved district-wide hegemony. Plurality in this sense is a spatial fact: the Nawani coalition's strength lay in Kallur Kot and Darya Khan and the Dhandla coalition's in Bhakkar and Mankera, tehsils with different mixes of biradari, sect, and proximity to Mianwali.

Table 3 summarizes the label trajectories of the four principal contenders. The comparison with the 2005 alignments reported by *Dawn* is also instructive. In 2005, the Mastikhels and the Shahanis stood with the Dhandlas, and the Khanan Khel and Chheena clans (the latter among the Mankera biradaris reported as supporting the Nawanis) stood with the Nawanis; by 2018 the retrospective account placed the Mastikhels in the Nawani group and the Khanankhels, Shahanis, and Chheenas in the Dhandla group.[5354] The roster of allies had reorganized while the two poles remained.

Table 3. Label Trajectories of the Principal National Assembly Contenders

Contender	Base	2008	2013	2018
M. A. Dhandla	Bhakkar tehsil; Dhandla camp	PML-N; runner-up	Independent; won	PTI; won
R. A. Nawani	Bhakkar/Darya Khan; Nawani camp	Independent; won	PML-N nominee, disqualified; surrogate (independent) lost	Independent; runner-up
A. M. Khanankhel	Kallur Kot	Independent; won	PML-N; won	PML-N; runner-up
S. Mastikhel	Kallur Kot	PML-N; runner-up	Independent; runner-up	Independent; won

Sources: as for Table 2; disqualification and surrogate candidacy from the *Express Tribune*, *Business Recorder*, and *Lok Sujag*.

Discussion: Transformation without Displacement

The evidence supports three conclusions. The first concerns *label portability*. Dhandla contested 2008 as PML-N nominee, 2013 as independent, and 2018 as PTI; Mastikhel stood as PML-N in 2008 and as an independent in 2013 and 2018; Khanankhel moved from independent to PML-N; and Rashid Akbar Nawani stood as independent in 2008, attempted to stand as PML-N in 2013, and returned to independent status in 2018. None of these changes ended a career. The party label, in effect, operated as a licence that the state's dominant party issued or withheld, not as an organization to which these politicians were bound. This is consistent with the logic of Chandra's patronage democracy, in which access to the state, rather than programme, organises political choice.[55]

The second concerns *stability beneath volatility*. Table 4 shows that district-wide turnout stayed within a narrow band (66.2, 68.7, and 67.0 percent) even as the registered electorate rose from 567,027 to 871,657, an increase of 53.7 percent, or about 4.4 percent a year, nearly double the intercensal population growth rate of 2.39 percent.[56] The data do not disentangle new cohorts from improved registration. In NA-74 the top two candidates held between 82.5 and 94.6 percent of the vote in all three elections, a pattern consistent with a durable factional duopoly. In NA-73, by contrast, the top-two share fell from 92.8 percent in 2008 to 73.6 percent in 2018 as the PTI's ticket-holder and minor candidates absorbed more votes, which suggests that party competition, in the sense of a third pole not organised around a local

faction, emerged first in the tehsils nearest Mianwali. That interpretation is tentative, resting on a journalist's remark about Mianwali sympathies and a single constituency result.[57]

Table 4. Derived Electoral Indicators for the Two National Assembly Seats

Indicator	2008	2013	2018
Registered voters (both seats)	567,027	711,924	871,657
Ballots polled (both seats)	375,201	489,114	583,746
District turnout (%)	66.2	68.7	67.0
Rejected ballots (% of polled)	3.5	5.2	3.1
NA-73/97: top-two share of polled (%)	92.8	81.9	73.6
NA-74/98: top-two share of polled (%)	94.6	82.5	92.2
Independent winners (of two seats)	2	1	1

Source: author's calculations from the constituency totals in Table 2 and the compilations cited there. Registered voters rose 53.7 percent between 2008 and 2018.

The third concerns *plurality*. In a district with no demographically dominant biradari, with a Shia-led faction at one pole, and with Pashto-speaking, Punjabi, and Saraiki-speaking communities alongside one another, no single faction could organize a majority across all four tehsils.[58] Instead, the two coalitions divided the district spatially, and sub-district blocs such as the Chheena, Shahani, and Mastikhel families could decide outcomes by changing sides. This is consistent with Mohmand's emphasis on strategic voter behavior, and it suggests, tentatively, that factional equilibrium rather than hegemony is the likelier outcome where social structure is plural.[59] What changed over the decade was thus the *environment* in which the factions competed: a larger electorate, an intensified legal contest over eligibility, and the successive rise of two national parties willing to accept the factions' terms. The factions themselves were as consequential in 2018 as they had been in 2008.

Conclusion

Bhakkar between 2008 and 2018 offers a case of party politics transformed in form but not in substance. The party label moved from a marginal identifier, which the Nawanis could shed in 2008, to a scarce resource contested at the moment of nomination, which the PML-N supplied in 2013 and the PTI in 2018. The underlying actors, however, remained two family-led coalitions whose vote bases grew with the electorate and whose alliances shifted at the margin. Patronage and control of state institutions were the currency of both: seats vacated for provincial leaders, local government offices concentrated in one family, and legal challenges used to remove rivals from the ballot.

These findings carry implications for the study of Pakistani party systems. First, the independent-candidate category in ECP returns should not be read as a measure of anti-party sentiment; in Bhakkar it frequently designates a faction's own candidacy. Second, claims of a "PTI wave" in 2018 need to be disaggregated by constituency, since in NA-98 the wave carried a defecting faction leader and in NA-97 it left the party's own nominee in third place. Third, plurality, rather than party strength, restrains elite dominance in the district, a point that bears on debates about the democratic effects of clientelism.[60] The study's limits are plain. It rests on constituency totals rather than polling-station returns, on press accounts of local government results, and on journalistic testimony about alliances. Fuller work would require the Form-XX returns, provincial constituency results for each election, interviews with faction members and local officials, and a documentary history of local government finance and development allocations. Such work could test whether the patterns documented here, in particular the stability of faction vote bases across party labels, hold at the level of union councils and villages. Subsequent developments, including the return of the Dhandla group to the PML-N after 2018 and the factional realignments of 2023–24 reported by *Lok Sujag*, point to the same logic continuing beyond the period examined.[61]

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