



Institutional and Structural Dimensions of Police-Prosecution Coordination: A Qualitative Case Study from Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Effective coordination between law enforcement personnel and public prosecutors is critical in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. This qualitative case study examines the institutional and structural dynamics of police-prosecution coordination in Islamabad, Pakistan. By adopting Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory as theoretical perspectives, the study examines how formal rules, informal routines, and interdependencies over resources shape collaborative relations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen police investigators and five public prosecutors and analyzed using thematic coding procedures. The findings indicate that while there are formal institutional requirements, routine working practices are significantly shaped by informal norms, role definition ambiguities, and fractured communication channels. Moreover, resource interdependencies complicate power relations, often limiting effective case preparation and advocacy in the courtroom. The Islamabad case represents more prevalent systemic issues typical of Pakistan's justice system, suggesting an imperative for holistic reforms addressing clarifying roles, standardizing procedures, and strengthening accountability among agencies. This study contributes to academic and policy discourses, offering insights for future empirical studies on reform models specifically tailored for transitional legal systems.



1. Introduction

Effective partnership among law enforcement agencies and prosecution units forms an intrinsic aspect of modern criminal justice systems around the world. Such coordination not only enhances the authenticity of criminal cases but also underpins procedural justice and promotes public trust in

the administration of justice (Nielsen, 2014; Terpstra, 2011). The investigative work carried out by law enforcement agencies forms the probative bedrock of prosecutorial activities, which therefore means that any failure or deficiency on the investigation side can seriously compromise subsequent legal processes (Findlay, 2011). Prosecutors are greatly reliant on evidence quality, relevance, and admissibility collected by the police to set charges, construct argumentation, and withstand judicial challenge. Police investigators, on their part, depend on prosecutorial guidance for legal verification and strategic case construction, especially in complex or sensitive cases (Hodgson, 2001). Such interdependence places both sides within an operating continuum, under which the success of one relies or fails substantially on the success of the other (Meyer & O'Connell, 2019).

In spite of the universal acknowledgment of their interdependence, police-prosecution relations are generally marked by institutional conflict, ambiguous role definitions, and inconsistent modes of communication (Dandurand, 2014; Malsch & Nijboer, 2016). These inherent structural defects often result in disjointed case development, diminished prosecution efficiency, and, in the worst-case scenario, miscarriages of justice. Studies in a variety of different jurisdictions indicate that the coexistence of organizational silos, cultural resistance, and bureaucratic inertia exacerbates these coordination problems (Walker & Katz, 2011; Langer, 2011). In transitional legal systems, particularly those prevalent in many developing nations, these problems are especially salient due to the simultaneous existence of inherited colonial-era adversarial systems and ongoing procedural reforms (Shah, 2017; Jamil, 2020). As a result, enhancing the coordination of police and prosecutors is increasingly regarded as a critical mechanism for integrative criminal justice reform initiatives, with the aim of improving case outcomes, minimizing procedural delays, and enhancing the overall integrity of justice delivery systems.

Islamabad, the federal capital of Pakistan, presents a rare and representative administrative arrangement for studying police-prosecution coordination. Its system of governance, with centralized management complemented by district autonomy, captures the wider institutional trends prevalent throughout Pakistan yet also encapsulates specific federal characteristics. Islamabad's legal institutions function in a context shaped by inherited colonial administrative traditions, as well as by ongoing reforms intended to increase efficiency and accountability (Hassan & Hussain, 2021). This dual character makes Islamabad an interesting case for investigating how institutional arrangements affect operational cooperation between the police and the prosecutorial services.

Although a large body of cross-national literature discusses police-prosecution coordination, especially in Western countries, there is a huge gap in empirical studies concentrating on developing nations like Pakistan (Asadullah, 2022). Most studies fail to consider contextual specifics, including bureaucratic slack, resource imbalances, and legal pluralism, which are key factors that define institutional interactions in such environments (Shah, 2017). In addition, policy discussion in Pakistan has long focused on procedural reform without properly considering the structural and relational aspects that support effective collaboration.

This research aims to fill this gap by investigating two interconnected research questions: (1) How do institutional dynamics influence police-prosecution coordination in Islamabad? and (2) What are the perceived opportunities and challenges of this coordination? Through the use of a qualitative case study methodology, this research adds to the knowledge of organizational dynamics in Pakistan's criminal justice system. It emphasizes how institutional arrangements, unofficial practices, and inter-agency relations individually contribute to determining the effectiveness of criminal prosecutions. The research presents insights not merely for researchers with a focus on justice sector reforms but also for policymakers and practitioners wishing to frame

interventions that improve more integrated and responsible criminal justice procedures in Pakistan and comparable situations.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research relies on two related theoretical frameworks—Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory—to examine the coordination dynamics of Islamabad police and prosecution in Pakistan. Collectively, these theories offer an integrated framework for understanding the system-level drivers of collaboration, tensions, and practices between these two key criminal justice players.

According to Scott (2014), the institutional theory emphasizes how organizations are situated inside networks of officially recognized regulations, unofficially established standards, and socially created viewpoints that make up behavioral patterns and decision-making habits. Institutions are not operational configurations but normative regimes prescribing suitable actions and providing legitimation to the actions of organizations. Within police and prosecution dynamics, institutional theory explains how codified legal prescriptions and uncoded working habits exist together, typically in tension with each other, to direct inter-agency coordination (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For instance, although lawful criminal processes in Pakistan outline specific responsibilities for investigators and prosecutors, in reality, unofficial negotiation, discretionary actions, and bureaucratic routines significantly intervene in the outcomes of coordination (Shah, 2017). This institutional perspective is especially apt in Islamabad, where colonial legacies, bureaucratic intransigence, and maturing democratic reforms converge to frame the operating context of law enforcement and judicial stakeholders.

Completing this picture, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) presents a relational analysis of organizational conduct. Based on the work of Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), RDT asserts that organizations rely upon external actors for vital resources in order to survive and prosper and that this engenders cooperation patterns, bargaining, and power inequality. Used at the police-prosecution nexus, this theory can account for the interdependent relationships in which police departments depend on prosecutors for validation in law and presentation in court, while prosecutors rely on investigative agencies for prompt and credible evidence (Meyer & O'Connell, 2019). These dependencies necessarily provide opportunities for coordination but also generate tensions around control, autonomy, and influence. In the context of Pakistan, resource imbalances are especially glaring, since both the police and prosecution agencies tend to work within resource limitations, which results in bilateral bargaining as well as strategic non-cooperation at times (Asadullah, 2022). Analyzing such interdependencies based on the RDT framework therefore deepens our understanding of how coordination is not just a procedural reality but an outcome that results from negotiation based on power relations and material interests.

By combining Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory, this research positions police-prosecution coordination within the normative arrangements through which practices gain legitimacy and within the strategic transactions motivated by the need for resources. This two-theory framework makes possible a complex analysis that advances beyond facile descriptions of coordination to emphasize instead the intricate interaction among formal rules, informal practices, resource bargains, and power imbalances through which criminal justice is administered in Islamabad.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative design to examine the institutional and structural aspects of police-prosecution coordination in Islamabad, Pakistan. A qualitative research approach is most appropriate for revealing the intricate, subtle, and contextually situated interplay that defines inter-organizational relationships within the criminal justice system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the focus of the study was on experience, perception, and informal practices, qualitative inquiry makes it possible to explore the underlying dynamics that can be ignored by quantitative methods. Through rich, detailed accounts, this design makes it possible to examine the meanings actors attribute to their collaborative processes, organizational constraints, and opportunities.

Purposive sampling was utilized for the selection of participants who have first-hand and significant experience with police-prosecution coordination, a strategy ideally applied for qualitative studies in pursuit of depth rather than generalizability (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The sample consisted of fifteen police investigators and five public prosecutors, both of whom were serving under the jurisdiction of Islamabad. This sampling plan guaranteed that conclusions were reached from those who were best informed regarding institutional practice, operating challenges, and coordination mechanisms, all according to best practices in qualitative research design to prioritize the value of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). The sampling attempted rank diversity, departmental assignment, and years of experience diversity to obtain a wide variety of viewpoints, which is essential in strengthening the credibility and transferability of qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were gathered using in-depth, semi-structured interviews that followed a pre-drafted interview protocol. The interview guide was constructed from the study's theoretical framework and research questions to permit systematic investigation with the flexibility to follow emergent themes. Interviews were around 45 to 60 minutes long and were either face-to-face or virtual, depending on participant time and logistical issues. The sample consisted of twenty participants (5 prosecutors and 15 police investigators), providing breadth and depth to the data gathered.

For data analysis, thematic coding and interpretative techniques were utilized. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded employing inductive and deductive strategies. Initial open coding produced repeating patterns and concepts, which were then grouped into higher-order themes constituting the theoretical frameworks of institutional norms, informal practices, resource dependencies, and power dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to analysis permitted the identification of expected and new insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being researched.

Ethical principles were strictly followed during the research process. Informed consent was secured from all participants before conducting the interviews, with adequate explanations given about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was upheld strictly; pseudonyms were employed in transcripts and reporting to ensure participant anonymity, and all data were kept securely to avoid unauthorized access. Ethical clearance for the research was provided by the appropriate institutional review board before data collection.

4. Findings & Analysis: Institutional and Legal Framework

This section offers the major themes that emerged from the interviews conducted with police investigators and public prosecutors in Islamabad. The results are interpreted using institutional

theory and resource dependence theory, and placed in the context of the existing scholarly literature on criminal justice coordination.

4.1 Role of Police Investigators in Criminal Cases

The institutional responsibilities of police investigators in Islamabad are foundational to the initiation and development of criminal cases. Participants emphasized that investigators act "front-line warriors" in evidence collection, underscoring their centrality in case-building. As one respondent pointed out, "In a criminal case, police investigator act as front line warrior to the evidence collection." Their practices, however, tend to mix procedural knowledge with situational judgment, indicating a reliance on "common sense" at the time of evidence seizure and not on rigid legalistic paradigms: "Police investigation is more about common sense, we seize the articles which we sense that can be counted as evidence in that particular case."

This freedom of operation is balanced by formal institutionalized arrangements; different specialized cells have been set up for specific types of offenses, with a level of structural organization ("Different cells are established for the investigation of different offenses"). However, the work of police investigators is overseen by the courts, most importantly by defense cross-examinations that verify the legality and approach of evidence gathering ("Police investigators are subjected to cross-examination by the defense attorney in order to assess whether their investigative method and site construction conform with the law"). In addition, their institutional responsibilities go beyond investigation to implementation of court orders ("Police investigators are responsible for implementing the court orders at the conclusion of the trial, in arresting the convicted or releasing the acquitted"), which underscores the continuum of their role in the criminal justice process.

The results ring with earlier research that has indicated that even though police investigators have considerable independence in building case narratives, their reliance on legal legitimation is a major weakness (Meyer & O'Connell, 2019; Dandurand, 2014).

4.2 Role of Public Prosecutors in Criminal Cases

Public prosecutors in Islamabad hold a pivotal role at the nexus of advisory legal and courtroom advocacy. They are institutionally mandated to scrutinize and direct police investigations, as underscored by one prosecutor who said, "Prosecutor can seek report and can issue guidelines to police investigators when the challan is submitted to him." Their job also includes seeing that trials are just and that legal proceedings are properly initiated: "Prosecutors are responsible for ensuring a fair trial and initiate formal proceedings in the court of law."

In trial proceedings, prosecutors closely examine the evidence and cross-question defense submissions ("Prosecutors cross-examine the evidence put forward by a defense attorney during the criminal trial") and step in to ensure procedural correctness ("Prosecutors make objections regarding the improper defense attorney's questions"). Moreover, prosecutors can file for review of court rulings through appeals ("Prosecutors can file appeal against the court statement or reply to the defense attorney's appeal").

These observations uphold the contention of Dandurand (2014) that prosecutors are both legal gatekeepers and strategic case managers whose initial presence can have a substantial effect on case outcomes. Yet, within the Pakistani context, their role is seen as dependent upon discretionary involvement rather than systematic adoption within the investigative process.

4.3 Communication and Procedural Coordination

Coordination among police investigators and prosecutors is defined by a twin structure of official and unofficial communication, with noteworthy gaps in procedural coordination. Players complained of a lack of standard operating procedures (SOPs) governing their cooperation: "The coordination presently existing between the police investigation and prosecution at the investigation stage is not consistent with international standards."

A few interviewees pointed towards increased prosecutorial participation in the investigation stage: "More involvement of prosecutors as impartial and legal arbiters" and "The prosecutor should take part in designing charges against the accused." Further, prosecutors also have a key role in checking the adequacy of evidence during the preparation of the challan: "Prosecutors check the challan for the adequacy of evidence or documents according to the requirement of the case."

Investigation officers support prosecutors in court proceedings by acting as the main witnesses of the entire investigation process ("Investigation officer assist the public prosecutor in court proceedings, as being the principal eyewitness of the whole investigation process"), but cooperation after the trial is mostly absent ("No fruitful collaboration exists between investigation officer and public prosecutor at the post-trial stage").

These findings support earlier research in highlighting that formalized partnership mechanisms, such as joint case review and collaborative training, have the potential to substantially improve prosecution results (Nielsen, 2014; Malsch & Nijboer, 2016).

4.4 Structural Opportunities for Coordination

In spite of institutional limitations, there are real possibilities for enhancing coordination. Volunteers constantly emphasized the necessity of prosecutorial direction during evidence gathering: "The prosecutorial guidance will guide the investigators in gathering all the evidence pieces which can procure out conviction in the criminal case." Strategic filtering of evidence at the outset may lead to significant gains in efficiency: "The strategic filtering by use of the evidentiary test has the potential to trim the caseload by as much as 70% without decreasing the high rate of conviction at 95% for the reduced 30% of cases."

Pre-trial interventions were critical to building cases: "The pre-trial guidelines are of great importance for building up the case in ensuring correspondence between investigative modes and methods of evidence collection and the law." The participants suggested regular interaction between prosecutors and investigators to make the evidence more reliable: "Investigators should exchange the collected evidence with the concerned prosecutor, it will become more reliable and admissible in the court of law."

Coordination during the trial was considered to be most important in the context of arranging the logical sequence of evidence presentation ("Effective coordination during the trial will aid in the creation of a logical sequence of evidence presentation") and witness preparation ("Investigation officer with the prosecutor can assist in preparing eyewitnesses which will lead to concise and coherent testimonies"). Effective coordination maintains evidence integrity and avoids procedural dismissals ("Effective coordination will maintain the integrity of the evidence provided and avoids dismissals based on a procedure that was incorrect").

The appeal for efficient coordination finds resonance in global best practices highlighting coordinated pre-trial collaboration as a vehicle for raising conviction rates and speeding up justice

(Hodgson, 2001; Findlay, 2011). As one of the participants succinctly put it: "Justice delayed is justice denied. Efficient coordination will lead to the prompt trial of criminal cases."

4.5 Institutional Barriers to Effective Coordination

Major obstacles prevent effective police-prosecution collaboration from being realized in Islamabad. Organizational silos, professional jealousies, and structural vagaries were repeatedly raised concerns. One respondent noted, "A lack of meaningful coordination between police and prosecution has been observed, negatively impacting the effective delivery of justice." Scheduling misalignment worsens communication gaps: "The misalignment of schedules can lead to delays in communication and hinder the timely exchange of information."

In addition, perceptual divides are present; exclusive experts are how some police investigators view themselves, restricting their willingness to cooperate with prosecutors: "A perception gap may exist between the two entities, with police investigators potentially perceiving themselves as the sole experts in the investigative process." The absence of formal consultation procedures further inhibits cooperation: "No formal mechanism exists through which the evidence can be discussed with us."

Inadequate or poorly drafted challans due to lack of consultation by prosecutors were cited as major flaws: "This failure to consult can lead to challans that are incomplete, insufficiently prepared for trial, or even in conflict with the prosecutorial plan." Lastly, differing professional priorities between the two institutions negatively impact coordination ("The professional priorities and attitudes of police differ from the prosecution department which negatively impacts the coordination between them").

These results concur with existing literature that organizational culture, resource imbalances, and accountability voids generally hinder police-prosecutor collaboration (Walker & Katz, 2011; Terpstra, 2011).

5. Discussion

This research's results demonstrate the intricate dynamics between institutional norms and resource dependency in influencing police-prosecution coordination in Islamabad. Based on Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory, the analysis identifies how formal and informal structures, as well as inter-organizational resource requirements, affect role clarity, cooperation, and ultimately the efficacy of criminal justice outcomes.

5.1 Institutional Norms and Role Clarity

Institutional norms, both formal rules and informal practices, have a significant impact on the clarity of roles between public prosecutors and police investigators. Although formal legal systems define separate investigative and prosecutorial responsibilities, informal practices tend to blur them. As noted from the findings, police investigators occasionally see themselves as first-line case strategists using "common sense" instead of rigid compliance with legal structures, whereas prosecutors act only at the stage of challan review. This trend demonstrates Scott's (2014) claim that organizations do not act only through formal mandates but also through embedded normative systems influencing day-to-day practices.

The inherited colonial arrangements of the Pakistani criminal justice system heighten such ambiguity (Shah, 2017) to produce hybrid institutional settings under which formal independence

is often overridden by informal dependency. The same has been evidenced in South Asian contexts, as police and prosecution functions continue to be institutionally connected but operationally separated (Jamil, 2020). Within Islamabad, this absence of stable institutional role clarity breeds tension, undercuts efficiency, and reduces accountability, consistent with the wider criminal justice institutional dysfunction literature on transitional legal systems (Malsch & Nijboer, 2016).

5.2 Resource Dependency and Power Dynamics

Resource Dependence Theory offers additional explanatory power by illustrating how interdependence for essential resources—e.g., quality of evidence, legal knowledge, and validation of cases—organizes police-prosecutor relations. The research indicates that police investigators rely significantly on prosecutors for legal approval of their investigations, while prosecutors depend on the integrity and completeness of police evidence to construct their cases. This interdependence produces both opportunities for cooperation and areas of conflict, validating Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) initial propositions.

Prosecutors frequently reactively analyze challans rather than actively participate in investigations, which illustrates the uneven power dynamic that results from unfulfilled resource shortages. Meyer and O'Connell (2019) also reported that when prosecutors are poorly engaged in preliminary investigative phases, they become consumer resources instead of strategic collaborators and end up eroding case consistency. Comparative research in the US and Europe also indicates that early prosecution intervention substantially enhances conviction rates and minimizes procedural errors (Hodgson, 2001; Dandurand, 2014). In Islamabad, bureaucratic lethargy, absence of SOPs, and professional jealousies hinder such synergistic intervention.

In addition, the belief of some police officers that they are the "sole experts" reinforces power conflicts even more, similar to Terpstra's (2011) results about organizational cultures fighting external control. Here, resource dependency is not a source of integration but a source of contention.

5.3 Comparison with Other Studies

The Islamabad case study reflects more general trends in Pakistani and global research. According to Asadullah (2022), criminal justice reforms in Pakistan tend to fail because the relational aspects of inter-agency cooperation are not tackled. Likewise, Hassan and Hussain (2021) contend that unless there is systemic integration between prosecution and police, procedural reforms are superficial. Globally, research by Findlay (2011) and Nielsen (2014) highlights that police-prosecutor cooperation needs to be institutionalized early and persistently throughout criminal proceedings in order to be effective, a lesson Islamabad's system has yet to fully learn.

Still, Islamabad's troubles are unique in their foundations in hybrid institutional inheritances. As Western justice systems have developed consolidated investigative-prosecutorial arrangements (Malsch & Nijboer, 2016), Islamabad finds itself suspended between colonial clash-of-adversaries conventions and fragmented contemporary reform measures (Shah, 2017). So, certain barriers enumerated herein—professional silos and cultural opposition, to mention a couple—have a global reputation; yet others—such as bureaucratic disintegration and politicized instruments of accountability—find particularly exacerbated expressions in Pakistan (Jamil, 2020).

5.4 Islamabad as a Microcosm of Broader Systematic Challenges

The Islamabad case might be understood as a microcosm of the larger systemic problems facing Pakistan's criminal justice system. The institutional uncertainties, split communication channels, asymmetries of resources, and cultural resistance witnessed in Islamabad are reflective of national trends (Asadullah, 2022; Hassan & Hussain, 2021). In addition, the conflict between formal legal prescriptions and informal operating norms underscores the general challenge of institutionalizing the rule of law within post-colonial bureaucratic regimes (Ghani, 2018).

Notably, the research indicates that procedural simplification reforms alone (for instance, case management reforms or revisions to evidence law)—are not likely to produce significant improvements unless accompanied by the implementation of institutionalized collaborative frameworks, the definition of inter-agency roles, and the establishment of formal joint case management channels. Such combined reforms have been effectively put in place in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands (Findlay, 2011; Hodgson, 2001), providing useful models for Pakistan.

Finally, solving police-prosecutor coordination problems in Islamabad is not just a matter of policy reform but an institutional culture shift, encouraging early involvement, mutual accountability, and shared professional norms. In the absence of such systemic change, Islamabad's experience indicates that criminal justice outcomes will remain plagued by inefficiency, inconsistency, and public distrust.

Conclusion

This research has shed light on the key institutional and structural aspects that inform police-prosecution coordination in Islamabad, providing wider insights into the systemic operations of Pakistan's criminal justice system. The results indicate that although formal institutional structures outline clear-cut roles for investigators and prosecutors, deeply ingrained informal practices and normative uncertainties obscure these boundaries, compromising role clarity and operational effectiveness. In addition, the analysis reveals that police and prosecution dependencies on one another for evidence verification and advocacy create intricate power relations that at once facilitate and hamper productive cooperation. Inefficiencies are sustained by non-standard operating procedures, segregated channels of communication, and resistance within and between institutions, and the full attainment of an integrative justice process is prevented. These structural and institutional problems are not endemic but symptomatic of deeper systemic shortcomings born of historical legacy and administrative lethargy.

The implications of these findings for criminal justice reform in Pakistan cannot be overemphasized. Enhancing the rule of law and better case outcomes will involve reforms that extend beyond procedural tweaks to address deeper structural misalignments. Institutionally defined roles, codified coordination procedures, coordinated training schemes, and a cultural transformation towards mutual accountability between police and prosecution are prerequisites for durable reform. Islamabad, as the federal capital, can serve as a model for piloting such interventions, demonstrating how targeted institutional redesign can foster more effective, transparent, and equitable justice delivery.

Future empirical research should excavate the micro-dynamics of police-prosecutor interactions across various regions of Pakistan by using longitudinal and comparative approaches to reveal variations in coordination practices. Based on this research, future research will examine the

frontline practitioners' lived realities to contend with institutional issues and will suggest evidence-based models for integrated police-prosecution frameworks specific to the socio-political context of Pakistan. By basing reform strategies on empirical realities instead of idealized models, future efforts can make significant contributions to constructing a criminal justice system that maintains efficiency, fairness, and public trust.

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