



**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION ESTABLISHMENT
(ACE) AND THE NATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY BUREAU (NAB):
JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES AND
ANTI-CORRUPTION MECHANISMS IN PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

Two notable agencies in Pakistan fighting corruption are the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), though they differ in terms of areas, jurisdiction, and mechanism of operation. The primary objective of the Anti-Corruption departments is to operate at the provincial level and to combat low to mid-level corruption in the public sector, particularly among government employees and local institutions. On the other hand, NAB is more effective and operates at the federal level, dealing with high-profile cases, including politicians, bureaucrats, and large-scale financial fraud. NAB is governed by its own rules, the NAB Ordinance 1999, headquartered by the power to plea bargain, arrest without warrant, and ACE is governed by provincial anti-corruption legislation and with less power. Both aim to promote transparency and accountability, with NAB being more central and influential, and ACE more localistic. The distinction between the two is vital so as to evaluate the multi-tiered approach taken by Pakistan against corruption and institutional accountability.

Keywords: challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context

Introduction

One of the most significant challenges to governance, economic growth, and societal trust in Pakistan is corruption (Shaikh & Khan, 2023). In order to plan this, several institutions with various mandates and jurisdictions, and operating structures have been created (Imran et al., 2023). The largest of these are the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability



Bureau (NAB), which is tasked with investigating and prosecuting corruption (Lughmani et al., 2023). They are both aimed at advancing the rule of law and eradicating corruption (Korejo et al., 2023), yet completely different in terms of form, jurisdiction, and law (Imran et al., 2023).

The Anti-Corruption Establishment is based primarily at the provincial level and addresses issues of misconduct and corruption within the local government, departments, and most government offices (Mehmood et al., 2024). It is subordinate to provincial governments and it complies with their anti-corruption laws and rules (Naseer, 2024). The ACE typically involves low- to medium-level officials working in the area of procedural anomalies and administrative abuse in day-to-day administrative incidents. NAB, on the other hand, was established in 1999 via the NAB Ordinance and is an independent federal entity (Korejo et al., 2023). It has national jurisdiction and tries large-profile corruption cases involving politicians, top government officials, corporate leaders, and other financial crimes of international scope. NAB receives a broader authority to investigate and prosecute, including arresting, seizing property, and bargaining pleas (Asad, 2025).

To learn about the multi-layered anti-corruption system in Pakistan, it is necessary to get to know the difference between ACE and NAB (Korejo et al., 2023). Even though both of them play a crucial role in society (Yasif, 2024), they do not all work equally well and are not as popular without society, as they differ in their working possibilities and the political topicality of their case (Imran et al., 2023).

Research Justification

The reason why the research on the disparity between the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was conducted is that it was necessary to critically appraise the structure and performance of the anti-corruption establishment in Pakistan. The two institutions have significant roles in the war on corruption, yet their different mandates, jurisdictions, and legal powers pose crucial questions on duplicity, accountability, and effectiveness. Being aware of such differences is critical to policymakers, researchers, and civil society to outline institutional gaps and propose solutions to enhance a more coordinated and open-minded anti-corruption approach.

Although NAB regularly gains national media attention because of its high-profile cases, provincial anti-corruption organizations such as ACE play an equally important role in dealing with corruption at the ground level. Nevertheless, the reputation of both of these institutions among the population has not been entirely positive (and still, to a large extent, because of being accused of political bias and selective accountability, as well as the absence of transparency). The research will give information on the strengths and weaknesses of the ACE and NAB by analyzing the structure, legal frameworks, and mode of operations of the two companies.

In addition, the research will assist in determining whether these institutions operate in a complementary or redundant manner and how they can be better coordinated to improve governance. A better understanding of their functions will help to reform anti-corruption efforts to develop institutional integrity and rebuild public trust in the justice system.



Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of ACE and NAB.
2. To highlight the theoretical context of ACE and NAB.
3. To analyze the laws regarding ACE and NAB.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding ACE and NAB.
5. To explore the opportunities for ACE and NAB..
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigour, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

Combating corruption in Pakistan is not a new topic of discussion, both academically and in policy (Ali, 2024). Reports and many studies have been conducted regarding the structure and performance of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Anti-Corruption (Asad, 2025) Establishment (ACE, which can be very useful in analyzing the difference in their functions in the anti-corruption sphere of Pakistan (Yasif, 2024).

Since its foundation in 1999 under the NAB Ordinance 1999, NAB has been the subject of a number of scholarly articles and media commentaries, as it has been the subject of some high-profile investigations, and its jurisdiction is extensive (Imran et al., 2023). Transparency International (Pakistan) says that NAB is at the center of probing mega cases of corruption involving politicians, bureaucrats, and influential business people (Korejo et al. 2023). According to Lodhi (2020) and other scholars, the legal autonomy of NAB and its robust investigative capabilities have been largely undermined by claims of political engineering and selective responsibility (Lughmani et al., 2023).



The Anti-Corruption Establishment, on the other hand, is at the provincial level under provincial laws (Imran et al., 2023). It has the mandate to probe into lower-level corruption, which mostly deals with government employees in local departments. Research conducted by Ahmed and Khan (2019) emphasizes that ACE is ineffective due to its limited jurisdiction, bureaucratic power, and resources. Besides, ACE frequently experiences prosecutions and poor enforcement of measures against prevention. Comparative literature also shows that there is a lack of coordination between NAB and ACE, which results in the overlaps of jurisdiction and inefficiency (Lughmani et al., 2023). Reports by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) emphasize that there is a need to enhance synergy, reform between the two institutions, and a clear definition of the roles of the two institutions to eliminate duplication (Korejo et al. 2023).

In general, the literature demonstrates that it is agreed that the increase of transparency, off-politicization of operations, and engagement of more agencies are required (Imran et al. 2023). Reforms to the multi-tiered anti-corruption system in Pakistan to achieve improved outcomes and citizen trust can thus be set through understanding (Lughmani et al., 2023) the institutional differences between NAB and ACE using existing literature on the issue (Naseer, 2024).

Historical Context of ACE and NAB

The institution of anti-corruption in Pakistan can be traced back to early independence. In the 1950s, (Lughmani et al., 2023) provincial governments established the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) to investigate the misconduct of government officials and junior-level public servants (Korejo et al., 2023). It was created based on the system of administrative responsibility of the colonial period, having few resources and a very small jurisdiction (Imran et al. 2023).

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB), in contrast, was formed much later in 1999, as a result of the NAB Ordinance, under the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf (Yasif, 2024). NAB was established as a federal organization with broad jurisdiction to probe the massive corruption, especially among politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspeople. In contrast to ACE, NAB was given some autonomy, such as the ability to arrest, plea bargain, recover assets, and conduct trials in the accountability courts (Imran et al., 2023). NAB was necessitated by the growing frustrations over the efficiency of provincial anti-corruption departments and the ever-increasing public pressure for more rigorous accountability measures. Gradually, the role of NAB became much more important and visible, often eclipsing ACE (Asad, 2025). A historical context, therefore, shows that. In contrast, ACE is a remnant of provincial administration (Lughmani et al., 2023), more localized in focus; NAB is more of a central approach to high-level accountability (Imran et al., 2023), which creates institutional differences that persist to this day as part of the anti-corruption efforts in Pakistan (Yasif, 2024).

Theoretical Context of ACE and NAB

The Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) can be discussed using several theoretical perspectives, namely the institutional theory and the theory of good governance. Institutional theory focuses on the influences of the formal structures, rules, and norms on organizational behavior and effectiveness. ACE and NAB were established



on varied institutional grounds -provincial and federal- which directly affect their power, jurisdiction, and performance. Provincial laws govern ACE and lack resources and political power, whereas NAB is a federal ordinance with greater autonomy and centralized authority.

Good governance theory centers on the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and efficiency. In this sense, the mandate of NAB is closer to addressing large-scale corruption and facilitating national integrity, whereas ACE is more applicable in establishing administrative accountability at the grassroots level. Critics, however, decry the lack of transparency and impartiality between the two institutions, questioning the idea of political interference and discrimination. The theoretical backgrounds allow us to understand the reason why ACE and NAB work in different ways and why their functions are complementary (or sometimes conflicting). The necessity of institutional changes and synchronized anti-corruption measures to hold accountable all levels of governing speaks more clearly in the theoretical light.

Laws Regarding ACE and NAB

These two institutions (the National Accountability Bureau and the Anti-Corruption Establishment) vary in the nature of the legal frameworks, which define the powers, jurisdiction, and responsibility of the bodies. These ten legal provisions and laws are the difference between the two:

- 1. National Accountability Ordinance, 1999:** The prime act governing NAB and granting it extraordinary powers to enquire, arrest, and prosecute cases of mega corruption.
- 2. Punjab Anti-Corruption Establishment Ordinance, 1961:** Governs ACE in Punjab; other anti-corruption agencies are governed by similar legislation.
- 3. Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860:** NAB and ACE used the section to address the issue of bribery and corrupt activity.
- 4. Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1898:** It has the rules of procedure that have to be followed in the process of investigation and prosecution, which ACE mostly applies.
- 5. Civil Servants Act, 1973:** The penalties of federal employees; used in NAB investigations.
- 6. Provincial Civil Servants Acts:** ACE applies these to deal with misconduct by provincial employees.
- 7. Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947:** This is another law that is still in use and relevant, but applied by ACE.
- 8. NAB Rules, 2002:** These outline the NAB internal procedures and protocols of investigation.
- 9. Plea Bargain Provision (NAO Section 25):** NAB, only, can be settled.
- 10. Accountability Courts (Under NAO):** NAO-special courts to hear NAB trials; ACE-regular session courts.

Challenges for ACE and NAB

Although the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) have a common objective of fighting corruption, there are a number of challenges that they have to deal with since they are different in structure, law, and operation. Jurisdiction is one of the primary obstacles causing confusion, and duplication of efforts is frequent. The two bodies lack clear coordination in investigating similar cases sometimes, which leads to delays and



inefficiency. Besides, ACE is subordinated to provincial governments, which contributes to its susceptibility to political factors and restricts its independence. Conversely, NAB, a federally independent entity, has often been accused of selective accountability and victimization by politics, which has had an impact on its credibility.

Imbalance of resources and powers is another challenge. NAB has access to specialized courts, is better funded, with greater legal authority (including arrest, seizure of assets, and plea bargains), and enjoys access to modern tools of investigation; in contrast, ACE lacks modern tools of inquiry and is burdened by bureaucratic delays. Inter-agency cooperation is also lacking, and there is no official solution to provide data exchange, referral of cases, or collaborative investigation. Moreover, people still do not trust either institution because they believe they are inefficient, biased, and that they are poor prosecutors. These issues underscore the need to define roles better, change the law, and coordinate better the efforts of both NAB and ACE in enhancing the anti-corruption regime in Pakistan.

Opportunities for ACE and NAB

Also, the variations in the structure and functions of the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) open the space to combat corruption in Pakistan in a more plural and multifaceted form. One of these opportunities is role specialization. NAB could target high-level corruption, mega financial scams, and political accountability at the national level, and ACE could target the lower-level corruption and misconduct at the provincial and departmental level. This division of roles may enhance productivity and reduce the queue. Another opportunity is the prospect of inter-agency cooperation. ACE and NAB can avoid duplication of jurisdiction and function as supplements to each other with a better system of information sharing and referral. Jurisdictional synergy and intranet databases could be achieved through jointly task forces and consolidated databases.

The decentralized character of ACE offers a unique chance to strengthen accountability at the grassroots level and mobilize the people in exposing local corruption. Meanwhile, mass corruption could be prevented by the concentration of authority in NAB and specialized legal tools, including plea bargaining and asset recovery. Capacity-building programs, training exchanges, and policy reforms can further address the effectiveness of both institutions. Collectively and in tandem, ACE and NAB will establish a more just, open, and responsive anti-corruption system in Pakistan.

Discussion

The Pakistani multi-layered anti-corruption set-up can be described with the contrasts between the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). ACE is a provincial agency that primarily handles the wrongdoing of low-level and middle-level governmental workers. It is provincial in nature and is often constrained by limited resources, politics, and red tape. In comparison, the NAB is a more institutionalized federal agency whose scope extends to chase high-profile instances of large-scale corruption involving politicians, bureaucrats, and business elites.

NAB can use specialized legislation, independent courts, and other means, including plea bargaining, which ACE cannot, leading to differences in efficiency and social evaluation. However,



the two institutions face criticism because of a lack of transparency, selectivity in accountability, and low prosecution outcomes. Despite all these differences, they might find a middle ground in improving the anti-corruption system in Pakistan when their roles are defined better and the inter-agency collaboration is enhanced.

Conclusion

The Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) face off in comparing the two-layer approach to the war against corruption in Pakistan. In contrast to the ACE, which operates on a provincial and departmental level of bribery, NAB operates on the national level and targets high-profile and large-scale incidents. The variations in mandates, legal authority, and sphere of operation are both a challenge and an opportunity. To maximize their effectiveness, there is a need to improve their effectiveness by defining their roles, enhance their coordination, and redesign institutions. By developing a more transparent, accountable, and efficient anti-corruption system, which will be effective at all levels of governance, Pakistan can achieve this through bodybuilding and encouraging teamwork.

Recommendations

- 1. Clear Jurisdictional boundaries:** Establish position and scope of NAB/ACE to prevent duplication and overlap of investigations.
- 2. Inter-Agency Coordination:** Establish formal cooperation, information, and common working groups between NAB and ACE.
- 3. Capacity Building:** Provide ACE top training, technology-based investigation, with adequate resources to do the best job possible.
- 4. Legal Reforms:** Reform provincial corruption legislation to reflect new accountability standards and lessen politicking.
- 5. De-Institutionalization:** NAB and ACE, independent and non-partisan.
- 6. Performance Audits:** Routine audit of an institution by an audit officer or a group of audit officers to determine performance and accountability.
- 7. Public Awareness Campaigns:** Social awareness on corruption reporting and institutional obligation should be held.
- 8. Unified Reporting System:** Establish a single point of access to citizen abuse reporting such that cases are sent to the appropriate authority.
- 9. Enhance Accountability Courts:** Enhance the accountability courts to be more efficient and transparent to conduct timely, fair trials.
- 10. Transparency and Oversight:** Add parliamentary/judicial oversight committee transparency to both NAB and ACE activities.

Research Limitations

As much as this study offers useful information on the comparison between the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), it must be admitted that there are several limitations to the study. To begin with, there are few up-to-date and reliable data available, especially on internal operations, case statistics, and performance measures of ACE in various provinces. Secondly, both institutions may be biased in official reports and



public statements due to the political sensitivity of both institutions. Also, this study is mainly descriptive and comparative in nature; the study lacks detailed case studies and field work, which would have provided a more subtle perspective on the effectiveness of institutions. There are also difficulties in accessing confidential data within the survey, including information on current investigations or internal accountability processes. Finally, views on corruption and institutional credibility are region-specific, and this can influence the external validity of the results. Primary data gathering and interviews need to be explored in the future.

Research Implications

The policy, law, and governance reforms induced by this study will be far-reaching, since the implication of this is that the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) are not structurally and functionally the same. Knowledge of such differences can assist in identifying institutional gaps, inefficiencies, and overlaps that could impede efficient anti-corruption in Pakistan. Such results imply that the mechanisms and jurisdictional boundaries between federal and provincial governments could be enhanced. This research shows the legislators that the provincial laws on anti-corruption are in urgent need of revision and that greater freedom of ACE is required to continue its work without any political interference. The study gives an overview that can be applied by the civil society and the media to ensure that both institutions are held accountable, and that they can insist on more transparency. Moreover, it also welcomes upcoming studies in institutional reforms, performance review, and citizen confidence in accountability institutions. These teachings in the long run may culminate in the creation of a more effective, consolidated, and coherent anti-corruption regime at the national and provincial levels.

Future Research Directions

Further research into the variation between the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) should be more realistic, and case studies in the assessment of their performance and the impact they provide.

- 1. Comparison Case Studies:** Compare the performance and procedure differences by analyzing the case study of corruption of ACE and NAB.
- 2. Public Perception Analysis:** Survey to find out the extent of ruling and satisfaction of the citizens of the two institutions and also the various provinces.
- 3. Performance Metrics:** In order to check institutional performance, it is necessary to consider the conviction rates, the time spent to dispose of a case, as well as the success rate of case investigation.
- 4. The test of political power:** An evaluation of the degree of political intervention in the decision-making and selection of cases that occur in both ACE and NAB.
- 5. Advantages and Disadvantages:** of the provincial laws against corruption compared to the NAB Ordinance.
- 6. Inter-Institutional Coordination:** Evaluation of the existing NAB-ACE coordination and recommendations as to how the coordination can be enhanced.



7. Courts of Justice: Speak on judicial oversight as one way to make sure that anti-corruption proceedings are cost-effective and accountable.

8. Digital Integration: Understand how e-governance and digital technology can be exploited to encourage transparency and case management.

9. Institutional Reforms: Suggest institutional reforms to promote ACE and NAB independence, ability, and responsibility.

10. Comparisons with other countries: Compare with the world to find out what best practices and innovations were employed in Pakistani anti-corruption institutions, to find out what worked best.

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