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An Analysis of Democracy in Pakistan: Challenges and Way Forward



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Abstract: *This article presents an analysis of the state of democracy in Pakistan, highlighting the challenges it faces and proposing a way forward. Despite making significant strides toward democratic governance since independence, Pakistan continues to grapple with numerous obstacles such as political instability, weak institutions, corruption, and military intervention. These challenges have hindered the consolidation of democratic norms and hindered the effective functioning of democratic processes. To overcome these hurdles, it is imperative to focus on strengthening institutions, promoting transparency and accountability, fostering a culture of political inclusivity, and enhancing civil education. By addressing these key areas, Pakistan can pave the way for a more robust and sustainable democratic system.*

Key Words: Democracy, Pakistan, Challenges, Political Instability, Military Interventions

Introduction

In a democracy, citizens have the choice of choosing representatives to represent them or exercising self-government. It is believed that this kind of government has its roots in ancient Greece. The concept of democracy, however, really gained momentum following the Westphalia Treaty (1648). Following the French Revolution in 1789, democracy gained popularity in society, and thinkers and writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau also promoted democracy as the only acceptable form of government. However, there was opposition to and fierce criticism of the monarchy and the Church's hegemony (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018). Since then, several countries in Europe and the West have started to transition to democratic government. The idea of democracy in Europe, especially after 1648, was unable to halt the spread of nationalism,

which corrupted the fundamental meaning of democracy, despite its explosive arrival into the system of world administration. Because democracy had to fight totalitarianism, fascism, and Nazism until the end of World War II, it did not have it easy up to the middle of the 20th century. Following 1945, democratic ideals finally achieved greater notoriety and spread throughout the world (Khan & Khan, 2020).

Democracy depends on a recognized set of norms, beliefs, mindsets, and practices as well as several different government structures. However, depending on the many customs and cultures around the world, all of these may have distinct forms and meanings. Democracy is based on some fundamental principles, not on the same behaviors (Shafqat, 1998).

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Basic Features of Democracy

Democracy has the following basic features:

Free and Transparent Elections

Free and fair elections are necessary for democracy to advance and succeed. Free and fair elections require that all voters have equal access to the voting process and free, secret votes. Fair elections will also assist citizens in choosing their representatives, and if those representatives fail to work for the welfare of citizens, voters will have the opportunity to reject them in the following election (Ahmed, [2013](#)).

Media's Function and Democracy

The media, including newspapers and television, play a crucial role in raising public awareness in modern states since access to free media will motivate people to participate in politics. Moreover, in nations with free media, there has been a significant popular involvement in politics. The success of democracy and sound administration depends on the mass media. The media influences public opinion by raising awareness of, providing a forum for, and educating voters about political and social concerns. It also promotes tolerance for others, which can advance democracy (Democracy in Pakistan, [2020](#)).

Education and Democracy

The emergence of democracy was never a sudden, unplanned event. Undoubtedly, a multitude of influences have contributed to its development. One of the primary causes is education since educated people may engage in active and constructive participation in governmental affairs. Education is therefore essential to the existence of democracy in human society and is at the core of it (Democracy in Pakistan, [2020](#)).

Judiciary's Role

One of the main components of democracy is the judiciary. It guarantees prompt and equitable justice for all members of the community, regardless of status or privileges. Judges are frequently under pressure, even in democracies, but they must resist this

temptation without straying from the rule of law. Because they create the rule of law and put an end to the exploitation of the weak, fair judicial processes are crucial for preserving peace and improving the economy. The American Jury was referred to by Alexis de Tocqueville as the most important political institution since it is so important to social governance. However, the judiciary's job should be restricted to gathering facts and not go beyond what the Constitution specifies. This is so that the judge can make decisions about specific events based on factual evidence. This enhances democracy's attractiveness by demoralizing illegitimacy without making allowances for unjust methods (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, [2018](#)).

Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech and expression, particularly when it comes to societal and political issues, is one of the fundamental components of democracy. Contradictory ideas on public and political issues are one of the many perspectives that a democratic government is intended to accommodate. Informed, educated, and supportive individuals who oppose unfair and harsh laws are essential to democracy. Aside from the fact that everyone's fundamental right to free speech and expression in a democracy, governments cannot permit anyone to abuse this freedom or use it against the State. Consequently, hate speech directed at any community, religion, or organization is prohibited in many democratic countries. Thus, ensuring that the right to free expression is handled responsibly is a challenge for all democracies (Zaidi, Kanwal, Riaz, & Mehboob, [2012](#)).

Religious Freedom and Tolerance

Every citizen should have the freedom to practice the religion of their choosing in a democracy. All citizens also have the freedom to practice their religion openly, privately, or not at all. The government, any society, or any group should not be able to intimidate the populace. The right to practice one's religion without interference from the State must be upheld by all members of a democratic society. In the 17th and 18th centuries,

numerous colonies of America established the concepts of secular democracy and religious freedom. However, several totalitarian leaders of the 20th century did so, including Mussolini in Italy (1922–1943), who accomplished this while in power ([Democracy Blog: Evolution of Democracy in Pakistan](#)).

Critical Evaluation of the Democratic System

Across the world, democracies have been successful in a large number of nations. But we cannot claim that democracy is the only way to address social, political, and economic issues. Different democratic States were unable to achieve the same results because of disparities in their cultures, values, literacy rates, and degrees of public political participation. Therefore, it is incorrect to think that all state-level issues can be resolved through democracy. Firstly, unlike other kinds of government, a democratic state might not be more economically adept and effective. Policies, investments, and economic growth can all be substantially better in a non-democratic state than in a democratic one. One Belt One Road, the grandest project of the twenty-first century, for example, was started by China, a communist country (Khan R., [2022](#)). Secondly, a state that is not democratic may have stronger administrative capabilities than one that is. A leader in a democracy must make decisions that are supported by laws, which takes time. However, in non-democratic systems, the head of state has complete authority over the legislative and executive departments, potentially enabling expeditious action in the best interests of the country (Sareen & Shekawat, [2022](#)). Thirdly, the primary challenge facing all types of governments, not just democratic ones, is good governance. History has shown that democracy could not establish a stable government in many nations. For instance, Pakistan has enjoyed democracy since gaining independence (1947) under the constitutions of 1956 and 1973, yet the general populace has remained dissatisfied due to ineffective government.

Furthermore, democratic States may have a more open political and social

structure than autocracies, but they may not have an open economy. In a nation where democracy replaces despotism, desirable reforms might not be achieved. For instance, the Middle Eastern Arab Spring was unable to get true democracy ([Democracy Blog: Evolution of Democracy in Pakistan](#)). The only successful nation is Tunisia. There has been hope for democracy in Egypt ever since Hosni Mubarak was toppled in 2011 across the Arab world. However, there were also limitations placed on public protests by the new laws and regulations. Elections in these nations also facilitate the emergence of radical political groupings. Principal instances of it are Egypt and Tunisia. Additionally, after Col. Muammar Gaddafi, their status remains unsatisfactory in Libya. On the other side, even after Saddam Hussain, sectarianism in Iraq has grown to be a significant issue. Law and order have been destroyed by Islamic State (IS), and things are just getting worse. As a result, the Gulf region was unable to adopt democratic standards. Furthermore, China is a non-democratic nation, and its remarkable economic development over the previous three decades is the strongest proof to date that there are successful paths to success even in the absence of democracy. Because of this, autocratic leaders in the Middle East and Asia are justifying their rule by claiming that attempts to democratize their political systems run the risk of jeopardizing other important goals, such as the progress of the economy (Batool, [2022](#)).

US Role in Promoting Democracy

Since World War One, many American presidents have argued that they are fighting for democracy to make the world safer. For instance, Presidents Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama all asserted that advancing democracy is the cornerstone of their foreign policies. Additionally, the administration of President George W. Bush initially claimed that the invasion of Iraq was motivated primarily by the threat of WMD. In addition to this, the Bush administration invaded Iraq and Afghanistan using the democratic tool and promoted democracy as a means to combat terrorism and despotism worldwide. Additionally, the regime-change strategy also included encouraging freedom in Iraq. As a

result, especially in the case of Iraq, the goal of supporting democracy suffered severely. After the American invasion, the Bush administration failed to keep order and tranquility in Iraq. Thus, sectarian violence in Iraq has increased since Saddam Hussain's execution. Furthermore, several terrorist groups, most notably Daesh, were successful in taking over the biggest cities in both Syria and Iraq (Khan R., [2022](#)).

Analysis of Democracy in Pakistan

Jinnah believed that Islam had imparted democratic values like tolerance, equality, and justice to us some 14 centuries prior. "Muslims who view complete manhood equality and believe in fraternity and liberty have democracy in their blood." The values of compassion, tolerance, and zeal are instilled in followers of Islam. All Muslims are required by Islamic beliefs to protect their neighbors and other minorities, regardless of caste or religion. Pakistan has seen a variety of diverse forms of government since achieving its independence, including democracy, martial law, and parliamentary and presidential systems. Pakistan's 1956 constitution established a democratic government, but it was overthrown in less than two years. General Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958. Ayub Khan passed the 1962 Constitution, which established Pakistan's core democratic institutions and contained the presidential system. However, due to nepotism, rigging of elections, and corruption, this technique was also ineffective in Pakistan (Khan & Khan, [2020](#)).

The new constitution was introduced in 1973 by the civilian government that had taken over from the martial law administration. The parliamentary form of government was reinstated by the 1973 constitutional amendment. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the first elected head of state of Pakistan, holding office for a full five years. In July 1977, Zia-ul-Haq distorted this democratic process once more by imposing martial law in Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan was ruled by an authoritarian government from 1977 to 1988 once more. In 1988, Benazir Bhutto was selected to be Pakistan's prime minister following the death

of Zia-ul-Haq (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, [2018](#)). However, allegations of corruption and poor administration led to the collapse of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government in 1990. From 1993 to 1996, the PPP was in charge once more, but due to accusations of corruption, it was unable to complete its term and was toppled. In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN) ruled from 1991 to 1993 and from 1997 to 1999. Again unable to complete its term, the elected PMLN government was placed under martial law by General Musharraf in October 1999. Pakistan's democratic process has constantly encountered obstacles (Ahmed, [2013](#)). To prevent repeat military coups, President Musharraf had pledged to leave Pakistan with a strong democracy in place. Additionally, he pledged that his government would improve basic comforts, lower poverty, and boost access to human resources—promises that he also kept. Furthermore, almost all elected politicians swore to serve the interests of the nation when they joined office. However, none of the governments could address the core issues that the common citizen had to deal with. As a result, issues including a shortage of basic services, food and water scarcity, electricity shortages, and inadequate medical facilities still plague the general public. Former Pakistani prime minister Mian Nawaz Shareef stated that Pakistan would transform into a true welfare state with the adoption of the appropriate policies and steadfast effort. However, just like the last administration, this one was unable to keep its promises (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, [2018](#)).

Absence of True Democratic Norms

Even though anytime the nation faced a dictatorship, practically all political groups fought for the return of democracy. However, there are several reasons why genuine democratic principles cannot prevail in Pakistan, including the country's propensity for political battles and disputes between governments. Therefore, the main obstacle to the growth of real democracy in Pakistan is the inconsistent and undemocratic behavior of political elites. PPP and PMLN ruled respectively from 1988 to 1999 and 2008 to 2013. In the May 2013 elections, the PMLN regained control (Batool, [2022](#)). Both parties,

led by Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Shareef, strived to restore democracy, but they paid little attention to the rights of the general public, particularly those of minorities, the provision of necessities, and the rule of law. Both have taken a proactive stance in favor of anti-democratic social and political norms. Therefore, in the case of Pakistan, the autocratic mindset of the administrations and leaders, rather than the democratic system of government, is the true issue. Since most politicians do not care about the promises they made when they first took office. Premier Nawaz Sharif also asserted that the restoration of democracy was his true goal, but his administration was unable to address the concerns facing the average citizen (Shafiq, [1998](#)).

Constitutional Crises

Pakistan has had three constitutions since gaining independence: in 1956, 1962, and 1973 which has also adversely affected democratic norms.

Political Parties Role in Democracy

Political parties are essential to the growth and development of democracy. Political parties serve as a platform for patronage and populist activism in Pakistan. However, changing the role of political parties so that they reflect and argue for constituent interests in the legislature presents the biggest challenge for political leadership. Unfortunately, Rather than promoting and encouraging democratic ideas, laws, behaviors, and tolerance for opposing parties, politicians adopt authoritarian attitudes and practices. The Pakistan Supreme Court's premises were attacked by PMLN supporters in November 1997, but the leadership did not dissuade them (Khan R., [2022](#)).

State Institutions Role in Democracy

Protecting the property and lives of its residents is the duty of the State in a democracy. The judiciary and police both play critical roles in this regard. All democratic governments, though, have struggled to keep the nation's calm and orderly. However, extremism and terrorism have grown in Pakistan. Police failed to

protect civilians from such atrocities, and many more innocent people are dying in targeted killings. To expel terrorist organizations from Pakistan, the government and Pakistani army launched Operation Zarb-e-azab. They were successful in their mission. Pakistan's reputation rose as a result, both locally and abroad, yet such institutional involvement in politics weakens democratic standards (Khan & Khan, [2020](#)).

Lack of Credibility of Elections

The foundation of a true democracy is the holding of regular, fair, and free elections. However, Pakistan's elections have a somewhat dismal track record in this area. As a result, all losing parties accused the winning side of election manipulation after the results were announced. When the parties entered government, they also rigged the election results. Due to Pakistan's multi-party system, it is challenging for a party to get a majority. In this way, coalition governments are always formed and many parties continue to hold government positions despite winning fewer electoral seats. For instance, in the May 2013 elections, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf gained ground as the second-largest party in the nation although PMLN received the majority of votes. Imran Khan, the head of the PTI, said that the 2013 elections had been manipulated, calling into severe doubt the openness of this crucial political activity (Zaidi, Kanwal, Riaz, & Mehboob, [2012](#)).

Political Leaders and the Public's Communication Gap

In Pakistan, both civic and military leaders have held power. Although virtually all political leaders favor democracy, they are not particularly interested in promoting genuine democratic values and behaviors. Political figures show up in public to ask for votes, but after being elected, they try to avoid engaging with common citizens (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, [2018](#)).

Conclusion

To conclude, democracy in Pakistan reveals a complex landscape with various challenges but also opportunities for progress. The country has experienced a tumultuous

democratic journey, characterized by political instability, weak governance, corruption, and military interference. These factors have hindered the consolidation of democracy and undermined public trust in institutions. One of the primary challenges is the recurring power struggle between civilian governments and the military. Frequent military interventions disrupt the democratic process, resulting in an unstable political environment. To overcome this challenge, it is crucial to establish a clear separation of powers, strengthen civilian control over the military, and uphold the principles of democratic governance. Moreover, Pakistan must address socio-economic disparities and ensure equal access to basic services and opportunities for all citizens. This necessitates implementing inclusive policies, promoting social justice, and addressing issues of poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Pakistan's democracy can be strengthened by focusing on several key areas. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing democratic processes, and promoting political pluralism are vital. Additionally, investing in education, improving the rule of law, and safeguarding the freedom of expression and media independence are crucial for a thriving democracy.

Way Forward

- To raise citizens' awareness of their rights and help them choose trustworthy candidates in elections, education is essential. The only thing that can truly change society and help democracy succeed is education.
 - Election dates ought to be established every five years, and all political parties should adhere to them. This is similar to the US, where election dates are predetermined and both parties must follow them every four years.
 - Pakistan should focus on enhancing the independence, accountability, and effectiveness of key democratic institutions such as the judiciary, electoral bodies, and the parliament.
 - The rule of law should be promoted to create a fair and impartial judicial system that is accessible to all citizens regardless of their social status or political affiliations.
 - Mechanisms should be established to monitor and evaluate progress in implementing democratic reforms, ensuring regular assessments and adjustment in strategies to address emerging challenges effectively.
 - Constructive dialogue should be encouraged among different political factions and interests to bridge divides and build consensus on critical issues, promoting political stability and national unity.
- The success of Pakistan's democracy depends on introducing merit into all institutions and getting rid of

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