

Democratic process in Pakistan: causes of failure and development

by

Sarita Nandmehar¹

¹Faculty of Humanities and Law, Nusa Putra University, Indonesia

sarita.nandmehar@npu.ac.id

<p>Article History Submitted: 8 September 2025 Revised: 21 September 2025 Accepted: 24 September 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Pakistan development; Controlled politics; Pakistan Government; Terrorism; Democratic Failure</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>Pakistan's strategic significance in the global arena, especially in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, stands in stark contrast to the ongoing political turbulence that has characterised the nation for decades. The intricate political landscape is primarily influenced by entrenched military and bureaucratic forces, overshadowing the aspirations for genuine democratic governance. This dynamic has led to a climate of persistent unrest, where the struggle between democratic ideals and authoritarian practices manifests in numerous ways. Historically, Pakistan has experienced a tumultuous back-and-forth between democracy and authoritarianism, resulting in a fragmented political structure that coups and the frequent replacement of leadership have marred. These disruptions have led to a lack of cohesive political consensus, a disregard for constitutional principles, and ineffective electoral mechanisms—all of which have severely undermined the foundations of democracy in the country. The military's intervention in politics has been a recurring theme, with significant coups occurring in 1958, 1969, 1977, and 1999. Each of these episodes ushered in periods of military rule that, while sometimes resulting in short-term economic growth and a semblance of political unity, paradoxically bred deeper authoritarian tendencies and stifled democratic progress. As a result, the nation has struggled with fragmented political factions and escalating violence, which now pose significant threats to its stability. These issues reflect the deep-rooted challenges within Pakistan's political system, making it a complex and often unstable landscape.</p>
--	--



Introduction

Since the devastating 9/11 attacks, Pakistan has emerged as a pivotal player in the intricate tapestry of South Asian geopolitics, navigating the complexities of a dual mission that involves both the generation and suppression of terrorism. This paradoxical role has positioned the nation at the heart of the region's political dynamics, even as it grapples with

significant internal instability. Pakistan's relationship with the United States has been characterized by a transactional 'use and throw' dynamic, creating an environment marked by chaos and unpredictability as each nation seeks to advance its strategic interests.

The political landscape of Pakistan is primarily shaped by a powerful military-bureaucratic entity, which often eclipses the influence of democratically elected governing bodies. Historically, since its independence, Pakistan has been caught in a relentless struggle between aspirations for democracy and the realities of authoritarian governance. This ongoing conflict poses substantial challenges to its nation-building efforts and undermines the development of a cohesive political framework, as extensively discussed by Kukreja and Singh (2005).

The failures of Pakistan's political structures have become increasingly apparent, as they have consistently fallen short of addressing the critical needs of the populace. This inadequacy has left many citizens entrenched in a cycle of despair and uncertainty about their future. With issues such as poverty, education, and security remaining inadequately managed, the citizens yearn for a more responsive government that can fulfill their aspirations for a stable and prosperous society. In this context, the interplay between civil society and political institutions remains crucial in shaping the nation's path forward.

At the heart of Pakistan's political malaise lies an unresolved power structure, which has perpetuated a cycle of instability throughout its turbulent history. This has manifested in numerous phases of chaos, marked by a lack of consensual politics, enduring constitutionalism, and an effective mechanism for the electoral transfer of power (Malik 2002). The flawed distribution of parliamentary seats and the absence of national consensus in the wake of the partition have further eroded constitutional integrity, allowing the rule of law to fragment. Today, Pakistan grapples with a myriad of challenges: rising social tensions, inter-ethnic conflicts, growing ethno-regional polarization, rampant religious fundamentalism, endemic sectarian violence (Malik 2002), entrenched corruption, and a troubling deficit in coordination and cooperation, all exacerbated by an increasing wave of Anti-American sentiment.

Historically, Pakistan has navigated a turbulent political landscape marked by alternating periods of civil governance and military dictatorship, with four distinct phases of each. Since its inception, the country has cycled through various constitutions—most notably those instituted in 1958, 1962, 1969, and 1973. Nonetheless, the core principles of

constitutionalism have remained strikingly absent. Each ruler, whether civilian or military, has tailored the constitution to fortify their own authority upon seizing power, undermining the foundational democratic ideals that the constitutions were ostensibly meant to uphold.

In its formative years, Pakistan grappled with the challenge of establishing a robust constitutional framework, hampered by a failure to conduct regular and credible elections. This situation was exacerbated by the shortcomings of early leaders, including the nation's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Despite his pivotal role in the creation of Pakistan, Jinnah struggled to develop enduring political institutions and often prioritized personal ambition over the organization of political parties, which significantly stunted the nation's democratic growth (Jalal 1985). Following Jinnah's death, a leadership vacuum ensued, leading to political chaos and a marked decline in the legitimacy of the Muslim League, the dominant political party at the time. Without strong leadership or cohesive political parties to mobilize public support, a hegemonic military establishment began to rise, capitalizing on the prevailing disarray.

A combination of factors—such as heightened centralism, a pronounced sense of Muslim nationalism, entrenched landlordism, and strong tribal allegiances—shaped Pakistan's political landscape into one dominated by elitist tendencies. The collaboration between the military and the bureaucracy allowed these institutions to consolidate power, fundamentally altering the power dynamics within the nation (Jalal 1990). This evolution set the stage for the military coup of 1958, led by Ayub Khan, which marked the beginning of a prolonged era of military rule and the emergence of a pervasive coup culture that would define Pakistan's subsequent political history.

Since that pivotal moment, control of the government has oscillated between civilian and military rule, with successive leaders rising to power through a series of internal and external coups. Each new regime has often overthrown its predecessor and imposed martial law, disregarding the sanctity of democratically elected governments. The country has witnessed a succession of coups executed by notable figures such as Ayub Khan in 1958, Yahya Khan in March 1969, Zia-ul-Haq in July 1977, and General Musharraf in 1999 (Cohen 2006). Zia's tenure, in particular, emerged as a crucial juncture in Pakistani history, as he significantly accelerated the process of Islamization, intertwining Islamic ideology with both military and civilian spheres.

In parallel, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who assumed leadership during a brief interlude of civilian governance, exercised autocratic governance that often mirrored the iron-fisted rule of his military predecessors. His regime was characterised by a blend of populism and repression, revealing how the power struggles between military and civil authorities have continually undermined Pakistan's democratic aspirations. This intricate tapestry of political evolution underscores the challenges of governance that have persisted throughout Pakistan's history, framing a complex narrative of power, legitimacy, and national identity.

Nevertheless, Pakistan did experience a decade-long experiment with democracy between 1988 and 1999, during which two prominent political figures, Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League, alternated in power. Despite serving two non-consecutive terms each, both leaders were thwarted by military interventions that prevented them from completing their full mandates (Cohen 2006). The current civil phase began following the fall of Musharraf's military rule, though each coup has had its rationale, often justified by the judiciary under the controversial "doctrine of necessity." Ironically, the periods of military governance are often recalled for their perceived benefits—among these, rapid economic growth, advancements in nuclear capabilities, and political unity, overshadowing the democratic aspirations that continue to elude the nation.

The political landscape of Pakistan has been a turbulent saga, marked by periods of turmoil and instability. During the reigns of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, the nation faced significant economic challenges, a rise in sectarian conflicts, and the marginalization of minority groups (Cohen, 2006). The oscillation between civilian and military rule produced a hybrid political order—a system where democratic institutions exist in form but are often subordinated to the strategic dominance of the military establishment (Rizvi, 2009). Repeated military coups, constitutional suspensions, and politicized judiciary rulings have eroded public confidence in the democratic process, fostering a culture of elite bargaining rather than participatory governance.

Interestingly, while democracy and freedom often took a backseat under military rule, some military governments exhibited a surprising degree of moderation. For example, during General Musharraf's era, the press experienced a level of freedom, minorities were granted reservations, and there was an effort to empower women—an initiative that even a female Prime Minister hadn't fully accomplished (Zaidi, n.d.; Jalal, 2014). These reforms, however, were often instrumental, designed to legitimize authoritarian rule and consolidate

international support rather than to deepen democracy substantively (Fair, 2014). Consequently, Pakistan's governance continues to oscillate between authoritarian stability and democratic fragility, reflecting the persistent tension between military tutelage and civilian aspirations for genuine democracy.

The book's introduction, written by M.P. Singh and Veena Kukreja, depicts Pakistan as a "nation still in the making" more than fifty years after its independence. It explores challenges such as political instability, fragile institutions, military interventions, excessive defence spending, and the military's influence on jihadi culture and terrorism. Mohammad Waseem analyses the political development in Pakistan, identifying four key factors: the influx of refugees from India, perceived security threats, the role of Islam, and military influence. These factors have shaped Pakistani politics by fostering Punjabi-Mohajir dominance, military ascendance, Islamic fundamentalism, and trends toward authoritarianism. The military's preference for a strong presidential system and centralised authority highlights its significant role in Pakistan's political landscape, with the roots of authoritarianism extending beyond military rule (Kukreja and Singh 2005). In his scholarly work, Sten Widmalm examines the emergence of separatism and violence in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) during the late 1980s, drawing on research conducted from 1992 to 2004, with the original thesis submitted to Uppsala University in 1997. His methodology includes interviews conducted with individuals on both sides of the conflict, through which he commends the integrity of the Indian press, while also recognizing a discernible trend toward nationalism within journalistic circles. Widmalm critically interrogates the Indian narrative regarding Pakistan's alleged sponsorship of the insurgency, proposing instead that the violence stems primarily from internal political dynamics rather than socio-economic discrimination (Widmalm 2002).

Adopting a Marxist theoretical framework, Widmalm correlates economic development with societal violence, pinpointing the actions of political elites in J&K and New Delhi between 1975 and 1989 as significant factors contributing to the unrest. He emphasises the absence of democratic legitimacy and instances of electoral malpractice as critical events that catalysed the separatist movement. Nonetheless, he appears to overlook the historical context of the Kashmir conflict, specifically the principles of partition and the coercive circumstances surrounding J&K's accession to India (Widmalm 2002).

Furthermore, the author does not adequately consider the growing political awareness and educational improvements among Kashmiris, which have empowered them

to advocate for their right to self-determination—a right recognised by the United Nations Security Council but ultimately unfulfilled(Widmalm 2002). The book presents three compelling arguments regarding the concept of military capital, or Milbus. First, Milbus embodies an insidious form of military capital that enables the armed forces to engage in predatory political behaviour, siphoning off resources from the public sphere to enrich the private sector, predominantly benefiting individuals connected to the military. This unchecked financial autonomy not only amplifies the military's power but also fosters a sense of independence from what they deem "incompetent" civilians, with welfare defined exclusively by the military's standards(Siddhiqa 2007).

Second, the phenomenon of military predation becomes particularly pronounced in totalitarian regimes, where officer cadres forge political and economic alliances to amass wealth. In underdeveloped economies such as Pakistan and Myanmar, militaries directly engage in exploitation, while in more developed systems, profits are primarily funnelled into private sector interests, with the military emerging as a secondary benefactor(Siddhiqa 2007).

Lastly, the military's economic exploitation mirrors a feudal and authoritarian political structure, with the armed forces extracting resources much like the historical elites of Europe. This "tribute" is a burden that citizens endure in the name of national security and the encouragement of private enterprise, often rationalised by perceived threats that impose additional strains on the populace. In essence, the military's predatory nature serves as both a catalyst and a byproduct of non-democratic systems(Siddhiqa 2007).

Method

This section outlines the methodological approach to investigate the causes of the failure of the democratic process in Pakistan. The goal is to analyse historical trends, political structures, and socio-economic factors that contribute to political instability and authoritarianism in the country. The study employs a qualitative research approach, enabling an in-depth exploration of the political landscape in Pakistan. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of historical contexts, political dynamics, and societal factors that influence democracy. An extensive review of existing literature, including books, academic journals, and reports, provides a foundation for understanding the historical and contemporary political issues in Pakistan. Key themes will include military influence, electoral

processes, and governance challenges. This study acknowledges potential limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative analysis and the challenge of accessing certain historical documents or interviews. Additionally, the complex nature of political dynamics in Pakistan may pose difficulties in isolating specific causal factors.

Result and Discussion

In the present world, Pakistan finds itself at a critical crossroads, ensnared in a web of violence as political elites battle for control. The fragmented political order seems on the brink of collapse, with political violence preventing the nation from blossoming into a robust democracy. Instead, it has entrenched authoritarianism (Zaidi, n.d.). Although military regimes historically provided some semblance of political and geographic cohesion, the causes for democratic decline are numerous. This long-standing dominance of the military continues to appear as a viable solution to govern the country.

Pakistan's creation was steeped in bloodshed and dislocation due to partition, resulting in the migration of nearly 8 million Muslims to the new nation. This migration created a dominant elite at the center, resulting in an uneven distribution of power that marginalized ethnic and linguistic minorities (Waseem, 2002). The treatment of sub-national identities as second-class citizens contributed significantly to political chaos. Fearing the loss of their standing, the migrant elite often shaped politics in non-representative ways (Waseem, 2002), which opened the door to military interference as a means to maintain stability. The withdrawal of the military from political affairs starting in 2008 reignited demands for autonomy among regional identities like the Baluch in Baluchistan, revealing a persistent void in nation-building initiatives.

For decades, national security has been prioritized, often at the expense of socio-economic stability. Pakistan's enduring hostility towards India has exacerbated institutional imbalances, with feelings of insecurity leading to increased military funding over the past 50 years (Siddiqi, 2007). In recent years, the democratic government has struggled to effectively address challenges from India or align international powers with its security interests, a domain where the military has historically excelled. India's growing influence in Afghanistan and its rise as an economic powerhouse, as evidenced by high-profile visits

from global leaders, have deepened Pakistan's insecurities, potentially paving the way for another military coup.

Throughout its history, Pakistan has been marred by political, economic, and strategic misfortunes, leaving the nation disillusioned under the stewardship of its leaders. At the heart of the turmoil lies corruption, which has often justified military coups that disrupt constitutional governance. Both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto faced allegations of corruption, and each coup was framed as a necessary response to the incompetence and wrongdoing of politicians (Cohen, 2006). The impact of their corruption has been devastating, with rampant mismanagement leading to staggering fiscal losses, including nearly 16 million dollars in tax corruption. Pakistan is increasingly becoming its own worst enemy.

Political parties in Pakistan have struggled to make a meaningful impact. Personal loyalties frequently overshadow party interests, with many parties viewed merely as extensions of individual leaders—a legacy that often dies with them. Regionalism has defined party dynamics, with factions such as the PPP drawing support primarily from Sindh, and internal divisions exacerbating political fractures. This has led to a landscape dominated by familial and kinship politics, reducing political engagement to competing groups vying for limited resources, further crippling effective governance (Baxter, 1987).

The restoration of democracy following Musharraf's fall has failed to resolve the structural issues within political parties. Today, they are unable to uphold political unity and govern effectively, ironically becoming a source of disunity themselves. This paves the way for the military to justify its return, cloaked in the guise of ensuring stability. Moreover, the significant influence of intelligence services can't be overlooked. The military's power has often been bolstered by these agencies, such as the ISI, which continue to play a vital role in politics. With intelligence gathering at their fingertips, these entities enable military commanders to exert influence over political processes from behind the scenes.

The political story of Pakistan is one of struggle, corruption, and a quest for stability amid chaos, with the specter of military intervention looming ever larger. The path forward remains fraught with challenges, but understanding this complex history is essential for envisioning a future where democracy might finally take root. Pakistan's history is a tapestry woven with threads of identity crises and a continuing search for its true self. The nation grapples with fundamental questions about what kind of state it is or should evolve into. On

one side of the spectrum, there are those advocating for a multinational state, while others call for a secular approach. Meanwhile, Islamists are pushing for an Islamic state governed by Sharia law, leading to a complex and contentious discourse about which version of Islam—be it Shia, Sunni, or another sect should prevail, and to what extent (Kukreja and Singh 2005).

Since its inception, Pakistan and its constitution have struggled to articulate a clear identity. The Objective Resolution of 1949, which took 18 months to reach a consensus, ironically became a foundational flaw, defining Pakistan as both theocratic and federal, democratic, and secular. In this dual identity, Urdu was designated as the national language, much to the chagrin of East Bengal, resulting in 425 amendments to the resolution despite its original 125 clauses. Subsequent constitutions echoed this paradox, leading to ongoing conflicts between traditionalists and modernists, which fuel political violence.

Another troubling aspect of Pakistan's democratic trajectory is the rising tide of religious intolerance, which has profoundly shaped its socio-political fabric. Although the seeds of Islamization were already embedded in the ideological foundations of the state, particularly in Muhammad Ali Jinnah's emphasis on an Islamic identity distinct from India, these tendencies intensified during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988). His Islamization policies institutionalized religious orthodoxy through the Hudood Ordinances and blasphemy laws, which marginalized religious minorities and emboldened extremist groups (Nasr, 2001; Jalal, 2014). Subsequent civilian governments under Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto failed to reverse these policies; instead, sectarian violence—especially between Sunni and Shia communities—intensified due to the politicization of religious identity and the proliferation of madrassas with foreign funding (Abou Zahab & Roy, 2004). The Ahmadiyya community, officially declared non-Muslim by the 1974 constitutional amendment, has since faced severe persecution, systemic exclusion, and targeted violence (Cohen, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2023). In recent decades, terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in mosques, markets, and public spaces have rendered daily life precarious, undermining civic trust and eroding democratic pluralism. Such religious intolerance not only threatens minority rights but also constrains freedom of expression, civil liberties, and the broader consolidation of democracy in Pakistan (Freedom House, 2025). As the nation continues to grapple with its identity crisis, extremist factions have taken a radical stance to uphold constitutional Islamic laws. The shocking assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, in January 2011, highlighted the dangerous

intersection of politics and religion, sparked by Taseer's support for amending the blasphemy law. Despite massive protests at Qadri's funeral, the government's impotency was clear when Sherry Rehman, a member of the Pakistan People's Party, withdrew her attempt to amend the blasphemy law, fearing backlash from extremists.

Today, the government appears stuck, unable to navigate the delicate balance between sectarian rivalries, often perceived as favoring Sunni perspectives while marginalizing Shia communities. The recent denial of Shia participation in Muharram ceremonies under the guise of security concerns raises pressing questions about religious discrimination. In the backdrop of this turmoil, radical religious indoctrination is gaining momentum, particularly following military operations against militants in North Waziristan, FATA, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Previously shielded from external interference, tribal lives have been disrupted, leading to sentiments that politicians are foreign agents serving Western interests. This radicalization undermines the legitimacy of the government, which is increasingly viewed unfavorably by its people.

Anti-American sentiments and aversion towards secularism are on the rise, as democracy becomes equated with Western ideologies. Ayub Khan's assertion that "Western Parliamentary democracy could not be imposed on the people of Pakistan" still resonates. With democracy facing skepticism and often intertwined with notions of morality and religion, the psyche of Pakistan appears more inclined towards authoritarianism. The military, closely identifying themselves with a religious agenda, positions itself as the guardian of the nation through a divine lens, often taking it upon themselves to ensure unity.

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks marked a considerable misfortune for Pakistan. Caught between global politics and terrorism, the country's strength has dramatically waned. The alliance with the U.S. in the "War on Terror" has turned counterproductive, leading to internal instability and a surge in violence. The strain on Pakistan's economy is staggering, with costs reaching 61 million dollars by September 2010. The current government, seen as detrimental to both state and military interests, has fueled tensions, demonstrating an insatiable thirst for political power—an ambition made clear through Musharraf's attempt to establish the "All Pakistan Muslim League" in October 2010, albeit without a solid foundation. As Pakistan navigates these turbulent waters, the question remains: what direction will it take in defining its identity and future?

Conclusion

Examining the situation in Pakistan reveals an ongoing struggle for power among various entities. The judiciary, in particular, has become increasingly active. Although the country has witnessed significant constitutional developments through the 18th Amendment, tensions between the executive and judiciary remain a central issue. Key concerns—such as the appointment of judges, the use of emergency powers, and presidential immunity—still lack resolution. The 18th Amendment aimed to shift substantial powers from the presidency to parliament, reinforcing the principles of parliamentary democracy.

However, the restoration of democracy appears to have faltered, leading to disappointment. This is exacerbated by the reluctance of landlords, bureaucrats, intelligence agencies, the judiciary, and religious fundamentalists—most of whom are resistant to the rule of law and, except for the judiciary, often support military governance. Throughout the transition period, various branches of government have strived to expand their influence, their roles remaining poorly defined. This struggle has been underscored by cases like the NRO case (under Article 48 of the 1973 Constitution) involving Asif Ali Zardari. The 18th Amendment, intended to dismantle absolute central authority and enhance the effectiveness of the 1973 Constitution, has yielded limited results (Ahmed 2020).

In essence, no significant change has taken place; authoritarian institutions still dominate, and governance continues to be autocratic. The rise of a VIP culture within the government has contributed to public suffering and deepening alienation from the governing bodies and the central authority. Human rights violations persist, particularly in Balochistan (Et. 2025). The underdeveloped political culture has adversely impacted the economy, and Pakistan faces a myriad of challenges. For democracy and economic development to flourish, peace and security are vital prerequisites—yet, the current landscape within Pakistan poses significant threats to both.

References

- Abou Zahab, M., & Roy, O. (2004). *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*. Hurst & Company. Baxter, C. (1987). *Government And Politics In South Asia*. Avalon Publishing.

- Ahmed, I. (2020). "The 18th Amendment: Historical Developments and Debates in Pakistan." ISAS Insights. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-18th-amendment-historical-developments-and-debates-in-pakistan/>.
- Cohen, F. S. (2006). *The idea of Pakistan*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Et., O. (2025). "Republic of Balochistan Announced' Trends on Social Media as Baloch Leaders Declare Independence From Pak." The Economic Times.
- <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/republic-of-balochistan-announced-trends-on-social-media-as-baloch-leaders-declare-independence-from-pakistan/articleshow/121153664.cms?from=mdr>.
- Fair, C. C. (2014). *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*. Oxford University Press.
- Jalal, A. (1985). Inheriting the Raj: Jinnah and the Governor-Generalship Issue. *Modern Asian Studies*, 19(1), 29–53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00014542>
- Jalal, A. (2014). *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Kukreja, V., & Singh, M. P. (2005). *Pakistan: Democracy, Development and Security Issues*. SAGE Publications. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=K7DWxjSDlk4C>
- Malik, I. H. (2002). Pakistan in 2001: The Afghanistan crisis and the rediscovery of the frontline state. *Asian Survey*, 42(1), 204–212. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2002.42.1.204>
- Nasr, V. R. (2001). *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Rizvi, H. A. (2009). *Military, State and Society in Pakistan*. Palgrave Macmillan. Siddhiqa, A. (2007). Military Inc. In Oxford University Press (Vol. 14, Issue 1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19934270.2008.9756528>
- Waseem, M. (2002). Causes of Democratic Downslide. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37, 4532–4538. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4412810>
- Widmalm, S. (2002). *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective: Democracy and Violent Separatism in India*. Routledge/Curzon.