

Democracy in Pakistan: Hopes and Hurdles

Outline

Introduction

Thesis statement: There are certainly many hopes for democracy in Pakistan. However, to become a fully developed democracy, there are still some hurdles to overcome.

I. Features of an ideal democracy

- i) Effective participation
- ii) Equality in voting
- iii) Informed electorate
- iv) Citizens control of agenda
- v) Inclusion
- vi) Fundamental rights
- vii) Free, fair and frequent elections
- viii) Freedom of expression
- ix) Independent sources of information

II. Historical overview of democracy in Pakistan

III. Hopes for Democracy in Pakistan

A - Successive democratic governments since 2008 general elections

- i. General elections of 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2024
- ii. Voter turnout rate increased from

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44 percent in 2008 to 48 percent in 2024

B- No political interference by non-democratic forces
Geoeconomic policy of Pakistan

C- Political leaders are more sensible and mature now

- i- PNA's protest against Bhutto's regime in 1977 leading to his ouster.
- ii- Constant attempts by opposition to topple down ruling government in 1988-1999
- iii- Despite differences, no such cases since 2008 whereby opposition's protests led to a government's fall

D- A vibrant civil society and media

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan,
The Citizens Foundation, Pakistan
Fisher Folk Forum, Pakistan Federal
Union of Journalists, Dawn

E- Increased political awareness among youth

Voter turnout ~~decreased~~ in 2024 general elections was 11 percent higher than that of 2018 and 22 percent higher than that of 2013 - Gallup Exit Poll 2024

IV. Hurdles for democracy in Pakistan

A- Dynastic political parties

- i- PPP and PML-N, major dynastic parties in coalition government
- ii. Patronage and kinship based

B- Feudalism ^{percent}

Landlords held 42% seats in national parliament in 1970, in 2024 general elections, feudal seats were 55 percent

- Geo-Jang Election Cell Report

C- No political consensus on national issues

Kalabagh dam

D- Crisis of education

- i- 26.2 million out of school children
 - ii. Primary level dropout rate is 23 percent
- Pakistan Education Statistics, 2021-22

E- Population explosion

Population growth rate is 2.55 percent, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

V. The way forward to overcome hurdles for democracy in Pakistan

- i- Strong political will
- ii- Policy continuity

VI. Conclusion

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1)
"Commitment to democracy would continue to persist as one of the most cherished norms in the polity"

(Hasan Askari, Democracy in Pakistan). A conflict between professed democratic values and the operational realities of non-sustainable civilian institutions and processes has always existed in Pakistan. The redeeming feature of this conflict is that despite the long spells of military rule, the theoretical commitment to participatory democracy has persisted in Pakistan. Today, this is evident from successive transition of democratic governments since 2008 general elections. Moreover, there has been no political interference by non-democratic forces since the end of dictatorship in 2008. However, a strong dynastic and feudal grip on politics in the country, still poses a huge challenge on the path to full developing democracy in Pakistan. Although, there is an increased political consciousness among 64% of

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the country's population - that is youth - the education sector is still in deep crisis (UNDP). It is the education that determines how well-informed this youth is in its political orientation. ~~Therefore, successful democratic transitions:~~ Hence, there are certainly many hopes for democracy in Pakistan. However, to become a fully developed democracy, there are still some hurdles to overcome. In order to overcome them, it is imperative to ^{have political will to} carry out necessary reforms, and to ensure policy continuity for socio-economic development integral to a functioning democracy.

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This essay begins with explaining ~~idea~~ features of an ideal democracy. It then provides a historic overview of democracy in Pakistan. In the next section, hopes for the democracy in Pakistan are discussed; It is followed by hurdles for the country's democracy. In last, the way forward for the democracy in Pakistan is provided.

An ideal democracy should have, at a minimum, following ten features: effective participation; equality in voting; informed electorate; citizen control of agenda; inclusion; fundamental rights; free, fair and frequent elections; freedom of expression; ^{and} sources of information that are independent.

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, democracy in the country has been witnessing both hopes and hurdles. The founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was keen to introduce democratic system in Pakistan. However, his sudden death impeded its proper imposition.

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Liagat Ali Khan, afterwards, carried the vision of Jinnah, but his assassination resulted in his failure to give it a practical shape. All the efforts to build the 1956 constitution were squandered when General Ayub Khan ~~at~~ imposed the martial law, closing all doors of democracy. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto appeared on the political screen and injected a new hope for democracy in Pakistan. He pressurized General Yahya to hold elections. Consequently, he won the elections with a great margin in West Pakistan and took oath as first democratic leader in Pakistan. This was the first time that general elections were held in the country. However, the hope could not be sustained for a long time, as General Ziaul Haq imposed martial law in 1977. ~~He remaine~~ This blocked the road of democratic progress for a decade. After ~~Zia~~ General Zia ul Haq, democracy was seen in 1990s, but it remained fragile and weak; this gave signal to another dictator

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General Pervez Musharraf, who ruled from 1999 till 2008. It was the last dictatorship that Pakistan witnessed. Since then, there has been civilian leadership.

The fact that there has been successive democratic governments in Pakistan since 2008 is a big hope for the democracy in Pakistan.

The general elections took place in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024.

In all these elections, political parties had competed with each other, and ~~smoothly~~ transferred the power to the winning party.

The occurring of these regular electoral cycles ~~has~~^{been} instrumental in institutionalizing the peaceful transfer of power in Pakistan, which was absent before.

Furthermore, these regular elections also reflect an increasingly entrenched commitment to democratic principles, where rule of law and political accountability are becoming more deeply rooted in the polity of the country.

Moreover, the continuity of electoral process has also empowered the citizens. They

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Know more of political participation than that of in 2008. This is evident from voters turn out rate, that increased from 44% in 2008 to 48% in 2024. (Election Commission of Pakistan). Hence, Pakistan has been successful in creating an institutionalized and stabilized system of power transfer, which is having ripple effect on other democratic areas. This development is fundamental to the glory of democracy in any country.

The other side of the same coin is that there has been no intervention by extra-political forces in the democratic transitions since 2008. This is an indicator that democracy is gaining a stronghold. The situation is likely to be the same in the future because of the adoption of geoeconomic policy in the national security policy of the country. To become an economic connectivity hub for the region and the world, it is imperative that no such ^{step} ~~step~~ is taken that would be subject to sanctions by

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the international community.

Also, the senior political leaders are now more sensible and mature unlike the past when one democratic party conspired against the party in power and derailed democracy. For instance, in 1977, the PNA launched a protest movement against the ruling government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after the 1977 elections. Instead of solving the issue through dialogue, they demanded the ouster of the Bhutto government, which facilitated the third martial law of General Zia ul Haq. Similarly, in the decade of 1988-1999, Nawaz Sharif as CM of Punjab was daggers drawn with the Federal government led by Benazir Bhutto and tried his best to topple her government. Consequently, Benazir Bhutto adopted the same tactics to remove Nawaz Sharif. This continued ~~th~~ till 1999 when another martial law was imposed in the country. Political leaders of today have perhaps learnt their lesson and do not adopt

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Such tactics against their political rivals. In 2008, for example, during the rule of PPP, Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari were engaged in a verbal battle, but did not resort to the tactics of the old days that could have derailed democracy. Later on, Asif Ali Zardari, leader of PPP, got an opportunity to remove Nawaz government during Imran Khan's continuous protest in Islamabad in 2014. However, he knew doing so would play in the hands of anti-democratic elements. Hence, he did not support such protests. Thus, a comparison from the past shows that democratic leaders have now turned mature. They avoid taking any step that could harm the civilian rule.

Greater activism on the part of civil society, and the growing role of electronic and print media creates the hope that democracy will continue to flourish in Pakistan. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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is one such organization that is playing a pivotal role in promoting democratic governance.

It does so by generating ideas and pressure for constitutional and legal reforms; for participatory democracy and communities' role in governance; for fair electoral processes; for the independence of the judiciary and legal profession and for pro-people administration.

There are civil society organizations that are promoting particular democratic subjects, such as **The Citizens Foundation**

works to provide quality education to marginalized communities, and **Pakistan**

Fisherfolk Forum advocacy for the rights of fishing communities.

Education produces informed citizenry while empowering vulnerable fishing groups to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives results in an inclusive democracy.

A free and independent media is a cornerstone of democracy, and civil society in Pakistan has been active in defending press freedom. Organizations like

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the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and media houses such as Dawn have been at the forefront of challenging censorship and advocating for the rights of journalists. In democratic contexts, media plays a vital role in informing the public and providing a platform for political debate.

The political consciousness amongst the public, particularly youth, is integral to healthy democracy. In Pakistan, it is crucial, as youth - below the age 30 - forms 64 percent of the country's population (UNDP). Fortunately, the political awareness among youth is increasing over time, as evident from the voter turnout rate. According to Gallup Exit Poll 2024, youth voter turnout was roughly similar to the national voter turnout. This marks a massive improvement from earlier years where youth voter turnout was half or a third less than national average. The election 2024

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voter turnout of youth was 11 percent higher than that of 2018 and 22 percent higher than that of 2013 (Gallup Exit Poll 2024).

This implies that a broader section of population is represented in the decision-making process.

These young people are more likely to hold politicians accountable for their performance.

This constant rise in political participation through elections will help sustain and nurture a democratic culture over time, making the system more resilient against authoritarian tendencies.

The preceding paragraphs have discussed the hopes for the democracy in Pakistan.

The proceeding paragraphs will shed light on the hurdles for the country's developing democracy.

Political parties play a crucial role in facilitating democratic evolution. However, in Pakistan, the very nature of

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the political parties - that is, dynastic - is a stumbling block in the way of democracy.

The major parties of the current coalition government are Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League - N (PML-N). The former is built around Bhutto dynasty while the latter is founded on Sharif dynasty.

Such political structure of parties entails that the political power and leadership opportunity is limited to few families.

This leaves little space for ~~aspiring~~ aspiring politicians from middle-class and professional backgrounds to enter and survive in the country's political domain.

This is evident from the fact that since 2008, it has been either PPP or PML-N ruling the Pakistan three out of four times. The survival of dynastical politics is highly contingent upon the patronage and kinship.

As Anatol Lieven, in his book, "Pakistan a hard country," writes that "Patronage and kinship form the basic elements of the Pakistani political

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system." Dynastic parties utilize patronage to maintain their power, particularly when a coalition government is formed, which is the case most of the times. The principal partner in a coalition has to make policy compromises and accommodate the partners for distribution of state patronage and other rewards of power to sustain the coalition government. Moreover, the leaders of most of the major political parties are not elected, rather they assume positions by acclamation. The decision of who will hold the party reins at different tiers is based on loyalty, closeness, or financial support for the party rather than elections. This undermines meritocracy at all levels. Thus, the entrenchment of family-centric politics in the country continues to erode the democratic values of effective participation, inclusion, political rights, among others.

A related hurdle to the democracy of Pakistan is the curse of feudalism. In the old

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days, the landowners, empowered by British rule, lorded over great tracts of land. They used to house serfs and often abuse them in return for sharecropping and other forms of menial labor. Whereas in independent India rid itself of much of that feudal class, Pakistan's feeble attempts at land reform were ruled un-Islamic by its Supreme Court in 1990.

The economic power of these landowners is manifested in the form of political dominance. That is why today they have much hold over political landscape than before. Back in 1970, feudal landlords held 42 percent of the seats in the national parliament.

In the recent elections of 2024, 55 percent of the directly elected members belong to the feudal class (**Geo-Jang Election Cell Report**).

Democracy relies on the votes of local citizens. In Pakistan, these feudal lords enjoy full control over the authority and decisions of people in their respective areas. Since they own thousands of acres of agricultural lands,

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people living in their areas rely on them for livelihood; this makes these people impotent in the face of any injustice inflicted upon them. Thus, these landowners thwart democracy ~~in~~ ~~two~~ majorly in two ways. First, they ensure ~~people~~ ~~of~~ that their subjects are denied access to any education, let alone quality education. Second, these subjects of the landlords, as evident ~~is~~ in a maximum of the rural regions of Sindh and Balochistan, are under compulsion to cast their votes according to the intentions of their masters. Without abolishing feudalism, genuine democratic culture and system will remain elusive for Pakistan. As Anas A. Khan rightly establishes that "democracy and feudalism are like chalk and cheese, they cannot function together."

Another major hurdle in the way of democracy of Pakistan is the lack of political consensus on national issues. Political

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Consensus is the agreement among different groups or actors on political issues or policies.

It is considered as a desirable goal for a functional democracy, as it implies that the democratic process leads to acceptable and beneficial outcomes for most or all participants. In Pakistan, achieving political consensus has always been a challenge.

An example is the construction of Kalabagh Dam, which is a proposed hydroelectric dam on the Indus river at Kalabagh in the Mianwali District, Punjab. It has been intensely debated along ethnic and regional lines for over 40 years. If constructed, its potential advantages include generation of 3600 MW of electricity; and it is also suggested as a solution to the chronic flooding and related water crisis in the country. ~~However~~ Despite that, the debate remains in stalemate, as its construction is opposed by major political parties in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as ANP and PPP. Achieving political consensus is challenging.

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in a federal form of governance, but it is essential to the functioning of democracy.

Currently, Pakistan is faced with a deep crisis of education as well as population explosion. Without human development, the survival of true democracy is threatened. As per **Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22**, 26.2 million children in the country are out of the school. Of those who manage to enter school, **23 percent** of ~~them~~ them ~~drop~~ drop out at the primary level (**Pakistan Education Statistics, 2021-22**). This implies that a huge proportion of the potential future of Pakistan remains disenfranchised, unable to understand their rights, engage in informed political discourse or hold their leaders accountable. In other words, they lack essential knowledge, and critical thinking required to participate meaningfully in democratic processes. With one of the highest population growth rates of **2.55 percent** in the world, Pakistan faces

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mounting pressure on its already strained resources, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure (PBS). This population explosion will continue to dilute the impact of any development efforts made, making it difficult for the government to provide basic services to all citizens. As the population grows, so does the number of ~~be~~ uneducated and impoverished citizens in the country. This leads to increased social inequality, unemployment, and political instability; all of these threaten democracy.

The previous section discussed hurdles of the democracy in Pakistan. The next paragraph ~~explains~~ gives the suggestions to address them.

The way forward to overcome these hurdles is the need to have an iron political will on the part of politicians and policymakers. The political leaders should keep their vested interests that are

perpetuating the status quo aside. They should rather focus on working together to formulate and implement policies that prioritize national development. Policy continuity is a pre-requisite for socio-economic development. As Ahsan Iqbal, Minister of Planning and Development Initiatives, said that "It was a universal reality that no policy in any country bore fruit before a timeframe of ten years." It is crucial that the trend of abandoning, discontinuing or slowing the implementation of policies or projects inherited from the predecessor governments should end, so that the development can take place and consequently, democracy is strengthened.

To sum it up, the future of democracy in Pakistan is bright. ~~The fact that despite many hurdles it faced,~~ The biggest indicator of which is the successive democratic power transitions since 2008 with no intervention by non-democratic

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forces. The history before 2008 shows how democracy could never function on a continuous basis; thus, the time of 2008 onwards reflects a complete departure from ~~pe~~ previous era where democracy was constantly challenged. In addition, the continuous elections since 2008 have not only stabilized the power transfer process, but also institutionalized it - a characteristic that has deepened the roots of democracy in the country. There are still many hurdles to overcome, particularly strong feudal and dynastic grip on the politics that undermines meritocracy ~~at~~ at all levels. Furthermore, the crisis of human development is also a stumbling block on the way to democracy. However, the maturity that political leaders have manifested at various events, and more importantly, the active and highly significant roles being played by civil society and media are rays of hope for overcoming the remaining hurdles as well. The burgeoning youth,

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which holds the sea of potential, is much more politically aware than before. This is another indicator of why political leaders will have to perform efficiently and effectively to earn acceptance by the masses, which, in turn, will strengthen the democracy in the country. Hence, as aforementioned, the future holds promise for democracy in Pakistan. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."