

Polarized Politics: The issues and the challenges of democracy in Pakistan

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"If liberty and equality are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in government"

According to Aristotle, "Democracy is the form of government in which the free are rulers. Democracy in its present form, has taken a long time to emerge from the English Magna Carta, to the French and American Revolution in the 18th century. But since the latter half of the twentieth century, democracy has been established as a form of government to which every nation is entitled - whether in Europe, America, Asia or Africa. Democracy is a form of government that rests on the principles of freedom, equality, and participation of the people. Democracy in Pakistan is undergoing various challenges. For instance, unawareness among masses about democracy, lack of freedom of speech, Electoral frauds, weak governance, social disparities in a society, political instability and foreign interventions in a country are significant hurdles in a democracy. Despite these challenges, it is indefutable that democracy has attained a special place in Pakistan, and if it continues to flourish, its prospects can be multiple.

It includes wide acceptance of democracy as a form of government, growing awareness among masses through media, ensuring free and fair elections and improving the structure of governance. In Pakistan, democracy has been a tumultuous journey, with periods of military rule interspersed with civilian government. As the country continues to navigate its path towards a stable democratic system, the future of democracy in Pakistan presents both challenges and prospects.

Although divergence along ethnic, religious, provincial and ideological lines has existed since Pakistan's establishment, but the political polarization in Pakistan has limited the prospects for an integrated society. The first and the foremost cause of polarization in Pakistan lies in the lack of political consensus among the leading national parties. State institutions such as Parliament, fail to bring political parties to agree on certain important issues. In Pakistan, the elites have tend to fracture societal formation through religious, ethnic and ideological lines. They have encouraged values that 'run counter to nation and state building' in a demographically diversified country. Building and

Reinforcing strong, independent institutions that operate transparently and fairly can help reduce the sense of grievance that fuels polarization.

Firstly, the most significant challenge to the democracy of Pakistan is political instability. Political instability refers to a situation where a country or region experiences frequent or severe disruptions in its political system. Civilian governments have faced frequent challenges, with numerous elections and changes in leadership that often lead to political uncertainty. For instance, the major political parties are the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), and the People's Party with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) also emerging as a significant force in recent years. Frequent changes in leadership have led to shifts in policy direction and governance styles, contributing to instability. Thus, the clashes and conflicts between the political parties are the major impediments to the development of actual democratic norms.

Another challenge is the rise of extremism and terrorism. Pakistan has been grappling with the menace of terrorism for decades, with militant groups posing a serious threat to the democratic process. These groups often seek to undermine democratic

institutions, impose their own extremist ideology, and perpetrate violence to disrupt the democratic system. According to an annual security report issued by the Centre for research and security studies, Pakistan witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in 2023, marking a record six-year high. The presence of such radical elements in the country poses a significant challenge to the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan.

Despite these challenges, there are prospects for the future of democracy in Pakistan. One of the key prospects is the growing awareness and participation of the youth in the democratic process. Pakistan has a large youth population, and the increased access to information and technology has empowered young people to demand accountability, transparency, and good governance from their elected representatives.

As of recent estimates of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, ≈ 64.1 of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30. This represents a significant portion of the electorate and potential participants in democratic processes.

The youth can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of democracy in

Pakistan through their active engagement in civic activities and promotion of democratic values.

In conclusion, the future of democracy in Pakistan presents both challenges and prospects. Political instability, extremism, lack of accountability, social disparities, lack of awareness among masses and political polarization are significant challenges that need to be addressed to ensure a democratic form of government. However, the growing awareness and participation of the youth, the active role of media, and the consolidation of democratic institutions can contribute to the prospects of democracy in Pakistan. As the country continues to strive for a democratic system that upholds the principles of freedom, equality, and participation, addressing these challenges will be crucial for the future of democracy in Pakistan.

⁶⁶ Democracy is the ultimate, positive revolution because it gives each and every individual the power to control their lives. And we can work together to create a just, sustainable world

(Bill Blackman)

