

Polarised Politics:

Challenges for Democracy

In Pakistan.

(A) Introduction

(B) Current Political Landscape in Pakistan

(C) Grounds for Political Polarization in Pakistan:

(a) Military intervention in Politics.

(b) Ethnic and Regional tensions

(c) Religious extremism

(d) Economic disparities

(e) Political rhetoric and slogan Politics

(f) Role of Political elites

(g) Biased Media

(D) Challenges of Democracy From Political Polarization in Pakistan :

(i) Institutional challenges:

- (a) Independence of Judiciary is Compromised.
- (b) Reduction in legislation.
- (c) Abuse of Executive powers.

(ii) Social challenges:

- (a) Polarization shatters informal norms of Democracy.
- (b) Rise in hate based politics.
- (c) creation of Psychological environment fueled by fear, intolerance & Persecution.

(E) Way Forwards :

- (a) Institutional reforms
- (b) Legal and Judicial action to limit Polarization

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(c) Productive role of Political elites.

(F) Conclusion.

Pakistan polarised Politics has become a ticking bomb, threatening to derail the country's fragile democracy and plunge it into chaos. Political polarization refers to the increasing divide between different political groups or individuals with opposing views and ideologies. The major causes of political polarization include Military intervention in politics, role of political elites, economic disparities, political rhetoric and slogan politics, Biased media and religious extremism. These factors created division between parties and individuals which poses certain challenges to the democracy in Pakistan like Compromised judicial role, seduction in Legislation, Abuse of Executive power, shattering of informal norms, rise in hate based politics and formation of Psychological environment fueled by fear, intolerance

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and persecution. However, there is a remedy to every evil, so political polarization can be minimized by through the constructive role of Political elites, Dialogue and engagements among political Elites, Legal and Judicial action to minimize Polarization and institutional reforms. This essay investigates the impacts of Political polarization on Democracy, highlighting the challenges posed to democratic institutions and social cohesion.

In Pakistan, high level of Polarization are not new. Since Independence, Pakistan is witnessing Polarization. During the first Decade of Independence, Pakistan was divided into two fronts; one in support of Urdu as a national language and other in support of Bengali as a national language which results in delay of constitution. In 1970's, there was again an ethnic tussle between East and West Pakistan, eventually results in the separation of the Federating units. During the General elections of 1977, an

alliance Pakistan National Alliance was formed against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. These historically soted polarization are evident in today's political landscape even in more vicious form. The new wave of polarization hits the country when the former Prime Minister of Pakistan was ousted from his office through vote of no confidence. Pakistan Democratic Movement, an alliance was formed against a party which divides citizens. The supporters of that party cross the line when their leader was arrested on 9th May, Pakistan witnessed worsed form of polarization evident from the hate speeches of the leaders from that party, violent protests from the supporters and damaging of state property was worth mentioning.

In the above paragraphs, Political landscape in Pakistan was discussed. While in the coming paragraphs, Causes of political polarization with reference to Pakistan will be discussed.

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One of the major cause of political polarization in Pakistan is the military intervention in politics. This led to a power struggle between civilian and Military leadership, which results in the formation of polarized political groups with some supporting military intervention and others advocating for a democratic system of government. As Ayesha Siddiqi ~~has~~ ^{has} quoted in her book *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* that "The Military intervention in politics has created a polarized political landscape in Pakistan, where parties are either Pro-military or Anti-Military". Therefore, the involvement of Military in politics breeds ground for polarised politics.

In addition to Military intervention in politics, Ethnic and regional tensions also plays significant role in exacerbating polarization in Pakistan. As Pakistan is the land to the multi ethnic, culture and diverse linguistic groups, with

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each group having their own political identity and interests. Based on different political identity and interests, different regional political parties are formed that represents the interests of that specific group. Awami National party represents the Pashtuns, The Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party also represents the Pashtuns, they represent specific communities and have a conflicting views on national issues, which ultimately divide the individuals. Dr Ishtiaq Ahmad, ^{in his book} "The Punjab, bloodied, partitioned and cleansed" sketch the map of Balochistan Nationalist movement by saying, "The Baloch Nationalist Movement has been fueled by the perceptions of exploitation by Sindhi and Punjabi Elites." This proves that ethnic and regional tensions add values to the political polarization in Pakistan.

Along with ethnic and regional tensions, Religious extremism is also plays important role in political polarization. When the religion is used as a card to

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to legitimate violent actions against the ^{people of} other religions, then such condition is known as religious extremism.

Most of the people of Pakistan are divided on religious ^{cards} like Muslims - vs - Anti Muslims, Sunni - vs - Shias and Deobandi - vs - Ahmadi. This division is natural, but

when the believers of each sect start hate against the believers of other religion, then different political groups and militants organization ^{use} supports them and for their personal gains. This creates division among people where some groups supports extremist ideologies while some condemns

them. Ahmad Rashid, a renowned Author, in his book Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia quoted,

"The Taliban presence in Pakistan has created divisions with in

Society". So we can conclude that religious extremism also grounds for political polarization in Pakistan.

In addition to religious extremism, Economic disparities is another factor for political polarization. Economic disparities means economic inequality where one province get more resources and the

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gets less. Economic marginalization often creates sense of deprivation which inculcate hate against those who gets a lot of share. This divides the citizens of a country into two groups i.e "Haves and Haves not".

Pakistani jurists, Retired Justice Fakhruddin told Dawn in an interview; "That the economic system has failed to deliver justice and equality, fueling polarization".

The discussion in the paragraph, concludes that economic disparities also lead to increased political polarization.

Furthermore, Economic disparities is also joined by Political rhetoric and slogan politics in adding to Polarization. In Pakistan, Politicians predominantly use political slogans and rhetorics to invigorate people; these slogans are employed in public statements and speeches during Rallies, protests and meetings.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Slogan Roti Kapra aur Makan and Naya Pakistan and Tabdili aa K

rahegi etc by Imran Khan are some hit and glorious mottoes of Pakistan rhetoric. It results in amplifying existing tensions and creating an "us - vs - them" mentality which causes polarization.

With political rhetoric and slogans politics, Role of political elites is also an important factor for political polarization. Political elites did not think about the national objective, interest and social cohesion.

Instead they came to politics to secure and protect their personal goals. It is the politician who deepens the polarization and brings them into their supporters through hate speeches against their rivals, and the opponent do the same. As a result, their supporters also starts the same which divides the citizens into two hostile groups.

As Callander and Carbajal, in his Article, Causes and effects of political polarization: A dynamic Analysis, quoted that "First political elite polarizes and then the masses, and the political elite

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Continues to accommodate Polarization until they achieve their political goals." So, role of political elites also causes political Polarization in Pakistan.

In the last but not the least, Biased media is also one of the factor that deepens polarization. Different media channels supports different parties. If a channel "A" supports Party "A", then the supporters of party "A" will love to see news from channel "A". While if channel "B" supports Party "B", then the supporters of Party "B" will support channel "B". Supporters of Party "B" will not like the news of channel "A" while supporters of Party "A" will not like the news of channel "B". Because people often get their news and information from that channels that reinforces their existing beliefs. Therefore, Biased media plays significant role in deepening political Polarization in Pakistan.

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In the previous paragraphs, causes of political polarization were discussed. In the coming paragraphs, challenges to democracy from in Pakistan from political polarization will be discussed.

The First challenge to Democracy from Political polarization is that the political divisions have compromised the independence of judiciary in Pakistan. As polarization divides the people into two groups, in that case if Judiciary give decision about the either group, the other group will start protesting on the ground that it is not a neutral decision. This narrative is build on the fact that every political parties have their pro-judges. The current 26th Amendment to the constitution further amplify this narrative. As opposition leader of Pakistan told Aljazeera, "These amendments are akin to suffocating a free judiciary". So these extreme political polarization leads to the compromised role of Judiciary, which is integral part of Democracy.

The second challenge

to democracy is reduction in legislation. Parliament is the main legislative body in democratic states where the will of the people is represented. If both the ^{opposing} sides have same power in the Parliament, then there will be a deadlock and no law shall be passed in such case. Because both of the parties will not reach to a reconciliation on the proposed Bill. So ultimately the government will go to issue Ordinances. As in Dawn Editorial on 13 March, 2022, it was mentioned that "The ruling government from 2018 - 2022, had promulgated at least 54 presidential Ordinances in the first three years of its tenure". This shows the inherent weakness of Democratic institution in the country.

The third challenge to the Democracy is the Abuse of Executive powers. When the Polarization become extreme, then the ruling parties use their

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governmental powers to suppress their opponents political parties. Rida Hosain in Dawn prism "PTI vs the State: Suppression of the people's will" on said; "The exclusion of PTI from the electoral process, prevented from fielding candidates on a party ticket and unlawful denial from its constitutional entitlement to reserved seats by ECP is the abuse of Executive power from to suppress largest political party." So, this is against the principles of Democracy as Democracy believes on Inclusion, not on divisive rhetoric, labelling opponents as traitors.

The fourth challenge to Democracy from political polarization is that it shatters the informal norms of Democracy. Polarization damages informal norms of democracy like tolerance and moderation, poisoning everyday interactions and relationships even at the household level. Polarization divides the members of the families, making them hostile to each other. They don't even maintain marital affairs with

each others. "According to Gallup Survey report 2022, 19% of men and women in their families do not support same Party." This shows that political polarization does not allow Democracy to flourish in Pakistan.

The fifth challenge is the Rise in hate based politics.

Polarization creates an environment where individuals are plotted against each other fostering an "us-vs-them" mentality. The politicians used negative terminologies against their opponents in public meetings and protests, which are followed by their supporters on social media. In the past couple of weeks, during session of National Assembly, some of the MNAs of the PII brings "Lottas" to the session, showing their hate and anger to the government. These ^{attitude} harms the principle of Democracy such as tolerance and moderation. Opposition of views and parties in governmental affairs is the beauty of the Democracy.

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So it must be respected not be hated.

Finally, Political polarization creates an ^{psychological} environment fueled by hate, fear, intolerance and Persecution. The current political landscape where no one can express their views and opinions. It shows Pakistan as an Orwellian State, where masses are controlled by the state agencies. Ruling government suppress the opponents views through these agencies, which create inculcate fear and persecution among the individuals. According to Dawn Article; "Pakistan Telecommunication Authority forcefully ordered Telecom Companies to use "Mass Surveillance System" to monitor 4 million people." This is against the democracy principles of Freedom of opinion, equality and Tolerance. So, this type of situation creates psychic environment in which everyone fears from the state agencies, undermining democratic culture.

In the above paragraphs, challenges to democracy were discussed, Now solutions will be

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discussed as every tunnel ends in the light.

The foremost solution is the dire need to do institutional reforms like decentralization of powers, changing electoral rules and going for inclusive setups. Institutional reforms proves very fruitful in handling such situation. Like **Kenya**, for instance, after election riots adopted a new constitution in 2010 and sought to ^{ease} end the competition for national office by giving regional offices greater autonomy and control over state resources. This ease the competition b/w the rivals for national office and which results in lower political polarization.

The second solution is the legal and judicial action to limit the polarization. There is an **Indian model** where the Supreme Court has spoken out in defence of Democratic institutions and demanded greater accountability for hate crimes and political violence.

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Supreme Court of Pakistan can adopt the same ^{model} to minimize the cases of polarization.

Last but not least, political elites / leadership can play a constructive role in minimizing this curse. Like in **Ecuador**, President Lenin Moreno rejected the polarizing tactics of his predecessor, even though the two come from the same political party. It is the need of the time ^{for politicians} to shift the polarised politics to inclusive politics, which will strengthen the Democracy.

In conclusion, there are different causes and ~~to~~ past challenges of political polarization. Causes like Military intervention in politics, Ethnic and regional tensions, Religious extremism, Economic disparities, political rhetoric and slogan politics are breeding grounds for extreme political polarization in Pakistan. This poses severe challenges to Democracy in Pakistan which includes compromised judicial role, reduction in legislation, Abuse of executive powers, shattering of

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informal norms of Democracy, Rise of hate based politics and creation of psychological environment. Keeping this situation in mind; Supreme Court must take actions against hate crimes and speeches and politicians should play constructive role to curb the situation. So, it is clear that if corrective measures are taken against the causes of political polarization, ^{then} Democracy have the chances to flourish well in true sense.