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Topic: Democracy in Pakistan: Hopes and Hurdles

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Essay

“Democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own social, political, economic, and cultural systems and their full participation in all spheres of their lives,” stated by the UNGA. This assertion states for self-rule, empowering common men to establish various institutions according to their aspirations and needs. This self-governing model was witnessed as early as the existence of Greek city-states. But the modern democracy emerged as a prominent form of governance in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and in North America. In twentieth century, as the result of decolonization and the ideological movement

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of the sub-continent's Muslims, Pakistan emerged as a nation-state. On partition from the United India, Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, envisioned the country as a democratic state. Referring to the inherent conformity between Islamic and democratic principles, Jinnah viewed, "Democracy is in the blood of Muslims who look upon complete equality of manhood and believe in fraternity and liberty?" It clearly indicates that the new country which was founded on the basis of Islamic ideology and comprised of Muslim majority provinces is easy to go with democratic form of governance. But over the course of time, various hurdles hindered the process of democratization in the country. Among them, intolerance,

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both in political and social spheres, and the entrenched elite capture in the country are noteworthy. However, the presence of the permanent Constitution and the emerging middle class instill hope for the strengthening of democracy in the country.

In the coming discourse, this essay explains democracy in Pakistan th. and the hurdles that have hindered the democratic progress of the country; moreover, it also addresses certain factors having the potential to enable the country achieve its dream of evolving into a fully democratic state, giving hope for the democratic progress.

In 1947, upon its independence, a democratic polity was envisioned to run the nascent country. Compelling reasons led to

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prioritise democracy over other forms of governance. Firstly, the country was obtained through a popular ideological movement, ^{leaving} ~~leaving~~ no space for any setup that is contrary to rule of the people and by the people. Secondly, the colonial legacy included the democratic institutions such as legislative assemblies, judiciary and political parties; therefore, the already established foundation set the stage for further democratization. Thirdly, Pakistan inherited a variegated population necessitating representation and pluralism. Lastly, Pakistan was created with a constitutional promise of protecting the identity and rights of the Muslims in the sub-continent. In short, in the light of the aforesaid reasons, only a democratic set up suited the newly independent country.

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Keeping in view the aspirations of the people and the needs of the country, the founding fathers duly idealised a democratic polity for Pakistan. Abdul Sattar, in his book *Pakistan's Foreign Policy*, states Jinnah's concept of Pakistan as a, "Muslim, liberal, democratic and modern nation-state". Similarly, Liaqat Ali Khan, the first prime minister of Pakistan, envisioned Pakistan as a progressive democratic polity founded on the Islamic principles of social welfare, religious tolerance and equal rights of all citizens. To sum up, the views of the founding fathers provided the much needed insights for the future course of governance that was not other than democracy.

Pakistan that was created as the result of a

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popular movement and guided on the path of democratization by its founding fathers faces numerous hurdles in its every drive of democratizing itself; its governance; few of them are mentioned below.

Firstly, intolerance is a notable hurdle in the progress of democratic governance in the country. It refers to the limited space for conflicting opinions and practices. In Pakistan, this lack of tolerance can be witnessed in both social and political spheres. In social sphere, sectarian violence, religious intolerance, mob violence and mob lynching can be frequently observed. Similarly, intolerance of dissident voices, political victimization, suppressing opposition and other civil and political rights marks the deep rooted political intolerance.

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This malign intolerance undermines basic democratic principles of mutual respect, open dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Mahatma Gandhi said: "Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit". Therefore, it can be deduced that the entrenched intolerance in the country hampers the growth of democracy in Pakistan.

Secondly, elite capture inhibits the democratic governance in the country. Elite capture is a phenomenon where a small group of privileged people monopolize the process of decision-making. In Pakistan, they monopolize both political and economic spheres. Politically, increased centralization, exclusive decision-making process and vested interest driven policies are all the results of

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elite capture, weakening the vital democratic principles of inclusivity, effective representation, and transparency. The International Crisis Group report, "Pakistan: The Elite Capture of the State" has big highlights that the elite capture has adversely impacted the governance and democratic practices in Pakistan. Moreover, economically, the prevailing inequality in the country which has obvious political repercussions is a consequence of elite capture, leading to impoverishment in the country. As *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson addresses the impacts of extractive institutions where the policies favor the few over the majority of population, exacerbating inequality and poverty. Shortly, the ingrained elite capture in the country

has obstructed the flourishing of democratic norms in the country.

Thirdly, recurring military interventions have weakened the democratic process in the country. Over its life span, almost half of the life, the country has directly been ruled by the military; moreover, in the remaining years the military interfered in civilian affairs in various shapes. Analysing its direct and indirect role, the military rule has derailed the democratic process, curtailed freedoms, abrogated Constitutions, sidelined democratic leaders and centralised the decision-making process. Conversely, India having a shared history with Pakistan has never witnessed a nationwide military coup; therefore, a functional democratic system has been evolved there. Ayesha

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Jalal in her book. The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics claims that the frequent military interventions have left Pakistan with a weak political class, perpetually reliant on the military for legitimacy. To conclude, in the derailment of the evolution of the democratic governance, the recurring and long-running military regimes have played its detrimental role.

Lastly, the imbalanced role played by the judiciary has not let the democracy flourish in the country. Considered as a custodian of the Constitution, the judiciary has the potential to ensure the implementation of the democratic principles, individual rights and freedoms; however, the Pakistan's judiciary is marked with the overreach,

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politicization, and often compliance with the executive and military. In its controversial history, it has validated martial laws, sacked elected prime ministers and has become a tool of the state policy rather than ensuring its independence. Though these controversial decisions had to be reverted later ~~but~~ and the judiciary seemed apologetic but the damage caused to the country and its polity could not be reversed. Understandably, a system with the judiciary of that credibility was bound to fail. As Hazrat Umar, the second caliph of Islam, famously said: "A system based in disbelief will endure but not the one with injustice". Hence, it can be concluded that the imbalanced role of judiciary has adversely impacted the process of democratization in the country.

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In the above paragraphs, it has been proved that the democratic process has been hindered; in the coming discussion, certain factors are highlighted that instill hope for the democratic progress in the country.

To mention a few, the presence of a permanent Constitution in the form of the Constitution of 1973 is a hope for the democratic growth of the country. Though the country has been governed under various Constitutions like the Act of 1935, the Constitution of 1956, ^{and} the Constitution of 1962. But the Constitution of 1973 is a home-grown, the ^{first} one formulated by an elected assembly and the one that proved resilient in the face of direct and indirect military interventions. Moreover, this sacred document guarantees

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provincial autonomy, a system of checks and balances, fundamental rights and freedoms, and rights of minorities; therefore it is widely accepted across the country. Even the most disgruntled voices, particularly those in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan also demand full implementation of the Constitution and seek their rights accordingly. This unanimous recognition of the Constitution sets a stage for democratization in the country. As Barack Obama, the former president of the United States, says "Constitution is a foundation upon which democracy is built". Hence, 1973 Constitution gives a glowing hope for democratic progress in the country.

The emerging middle class is another factor paving the way for thriving democracy in the country.

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Keeping the world's history in view, the elites have mainly the benefactors of the system and so tried to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, it has mostly been the middle class that pressed for change and reforms, as evident from the historic French Revolution of 1789. Similarly, in the Book Intelligence Governance for 21st Century: A Middle Way between West and East, the authors, Nicolas Berggren and Nathan Garden argue that China's autocratic government faces severe pressure from the rising middle class, demanding rights and greater freedom. In Pakistan, PIDE estimates the middle class as 38% of the total population; This bulging population of educated middle class seeks transparency and accountability, demanding

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rights and freedoms, aspires for getting rid of the prevailing status quo; moreover, it has also led to the increased participation in state affairs, improving the turn out ratio from 42% in 2008 to 60% in 2024. In short, by promoting and championing the democratic principles, the rising middle class instills a hope for democratic development in the country.

Moreover, the positive potential of social media also encourages transition towards effective democratic governance. The privilege that it enjoys against mainstream media lies in its ability of not being controlled by the suppressive governments and, secondly, it enjoys a global scope that extends beyond states boundaries. This widespread network both in terms of its usage and scope

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leads to increase in transparency and accountability, gives voice to the marginalised sections of society, spreads awareness and promotes advocacy. The analysis of the recent events shows that an increase has been witnessed in the intensity and effectiveness of various movements like movements for gender equality, movements against violence and harassment, movements demanding equal economic opportunities and minority rights. This all contribute to the nurturing of an informed citizenry, laying a solid foundation for democratic growth. As Benjamin Barber, a British political scientist, claims that democracy can only be achieved by awaring and educating people. To sum, although ~~can~~ considered as a double-edged sword, its positive potential depicts a hopeful

outlook for the future of democracy in the country.

The resilient democratic system also gives hope for the democratic progress in the country. Over its life span, Pakistan's democratic framework has survived in the face of direct and indirect military interventions, political instability, political polarization, centre-provinces tussle and economic downturns. This resilience in the system stems from the country's strong ideological foundations, presence of a vibrant Constitution, practiced democratic norms and the people's unwavering commitment to democracy. Therefore, it is hoped that the system would be proved strong and firm against any undemocratic development.

To sum up, the founding fathers envisioned Pakistan to be truly a

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democratic country; however, since its inception, it has faced numerous challenges in its way of democratization but there are glaring hopes that a truly democratic setup is set to evolve in the country.

Among them, among them the emerging middle class which is educated and aware has given immense hope. Then, the rising social media has also contributes to the strengthening democratic norms in the country.

Moreover, a resilient democratic framework has been evolved, surviving through undemocratic blows; therefore, it is truly an asset for the future of democracy in the country.

Despite the hopes, the country confronts with numerous challenges in democratic progress. To mention few, the country's political system has been monopolised by the few individuals with

privileges. They prefer vested interest over national interests, making the system more and more exclusive. Along with this, the country's judiciary has played a role that is not aligned with the democratic progress. Furthermore, the democratic progress has been severely derailed by the direct and indirect military interventions, making the democratic development elusive to achieve. Acknowledging both hopes and hurdles, it can be assessed that the system is on the way of evolution, witnessing both backsliding and progress as the world's other democracies have witnessed and gone through. And soon, the country will be a truly democratic country as envisioned by its founding fathers. As Liaqat Ali Khan viewed: "Pakistan is a progressive democratic polity based on

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the Islamic principles of social welfare, religious tolerance and equal rights of every citizen?

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