

# DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN : HOPES AND HURDLES.

## OUTLINE

### A Introduction :-

#### Thesis Statement :-

Democracy in Pakistan faces numerous challenges, but there are also reasons to be hopeful.

### B An Overview of democratic history of Pakistan.

### C Hopes for democracy in Pakistan

- 1- Enhancing youth participation.
- 2- Increasing literacy rate.
- 3- Strengthening of institutions.
- 4- Amendments to the constitution.
- 5- Emerging new political parties
- 6- Conducting intra-party elections.
- 7- Successful transfer of power from one civilian government to another.

### D Hurdles in the way of democracy in Pakistan

- 1- Intervention of extra-democratic forces into political domains.
- 2- Weak political party system
- 3- Feudalism and kinship based leadership.

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- 4- Lack of transparency in electoral process.
- 5- Constitutional retrogression.
- 6- Poor literacy rate in the state.
- 7- No civic responsibility.
- 8- Politicization of accountability institutions.
- 9- Biased role of media.

## E Conclusion

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The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has been formed on the general will of people. The people of the Indo-Pak sub-continent demanded a separate homeland where they can live freely. The Muslims of the Indo-Pak sub-continent voted in favour of Pakistan and in this way many muslim majority states acceded to Pakistan. Hence, Pakistan was formed on democratic grounds. Since its creation, Pakistan is facing numerous challenges in democratic process but in recent years it has been evolved. Despite challenges, it has is hoped that it would be strengthened in the coming years.

Evolution of democratic system has seen many ups and downs. In our history of almost seventy five years, democratic system has remained for half of the time. In the remaining half, there remained dictatorship. There have been four phases of democracy and four phases of dictatorship. In the initial democratic phase from 1947 to 1958, Pakistan faced early problems like delay in constitution making, absence of elections, rise of military involvement, and

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political instability. Prior to second democratic phase from 1972 to 1977, it experienced two military interventions. The democratic phase of 1988-99 was very unstable. Article 58(2)b was exercised four times during this phase. The recent democratic phase from 2008 up till now has witnessed transfer of power from one civilian government to another, giving us many reasons to be hopeful.

In Pakistan, youth constitute a significant segment of the population, holding immense potential to drive positive changes and shape the nation's future. The increasing youth engagement in the democratic process of Pakistan will prove to be helpful in making strengthening Pakistan's democracy. As per Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), youth voter turnout has surged to the highest ever 48% in 2024, a substantial rise of 11% from 37% in 2018. Hence, it has led to increased accountability and transparency of political institutions.

Literacy plays a significant role in democratic process of a country. The literate people are well aware of their rights and duties.

They have the ability to bring positive changes in the political and democratic process. The literacy rate in Pakistan has always been low since its inception. But now it is improving. According to the Economic Survey 2023-2024, the literacy rate in Pakistan has been recorded at 62.8% and it had registered improvement in all provinces. This increase in literacy rate will have drastic impacts on democratic process.

Many steps have been taken for strengthening of institutions in Pakistan in order to bring stability and transparency. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) partnered with the Government of Pakistan to support its development initiatives and the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of its primary area of focus is democratic governance, where in the UNDP offers technical assistance to strengthen Pakistan's electoral and legislative process.

The constitutional amendments made in the past proved to be helpful in strengthening democracy. The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was a landmark in the constitutional history of Pakistan. Its main stress

was to decrease discretionary powers of president to dissolve national assembly. It aimed to restore parliamentary sovereignty by transferring powers from president to the prime minister, decentralizing the federal system, improving relationship between the center and provinces, and resolving the inter-provincial issues.

The Pakistani political system witnessed a change in the party politics where it transformed from a three-party system to a four-party system in a relatively short time period. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf emerged on the political scene and after just two elections was able to form a government. The party is having presence in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on one hand, and in urban Sindh on the other hand.

The strength and weakness of a political party is primarily dependant on the political culture within the party. The intra-party elections has been a forisical idea in Pakistan. The leadership of the party always remained controlled by dynasties i.e from grandfather, to father, and to son. Experts and veteran politicians

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have to stand behind the young planted dynastic leaders. However, the trend is changing now. The Election Commission of Pakistan ensures the conduct of free and fair intra-party elections through guidelines and monitoring.

Moreover, Pakistan's political history has been marked by civilian administration ousted by coups. General elections held in 2013 marked Pakistan's first transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another. Hence, the smooth transfer of power from one civilian government to another not only ensures transparency but also strengthens democracy. This, in turn, will lead towards political stability as well as economic progress.

Despite of these hopes, there are still a number of hurdles in the way of democracy in Pakistan. The foremost problem is the intervention of extra-democratic forces into political domains. Although direct role of military has largely been abandoned but still military exerts influence through indirect means. The military leaders influence political decisions without directly

holding power. Furthermore, military supports or opposes specific politicians or parties. The dismemberment of mainstream political parties and establishment of king parties like BAAP in 2017, PTI parliamentarianism and PTI Istehkam 2022 onwards is a classical example of indirect influence of military.

Another major element of weak democratic system is the weak political party system. Unfortunately, the political parties in Pakistan do not have strong roots in the public especially in lower and middle class. These are the parties of elites. From the founding parties till the recent ones these are the parties of either landlords or religious lords or industrial lords. There is a rise of urbanized class but still elitism dominates. The future of Pakistan lies in a political party system where the lower and middle class especially youth has a major role to play.

In addition to this, the leadership in Pakistan is based on feudalism and kinship. The leadership is transferred in a



hierarchical pattern from grandfather to father and to son or from grandfather to mother and to son. Experts have to stand behind the young planted dynastic leaders. Ministries are distributed in families in Pakistan. Hence, this kind of leadership hinders the stable democratic process.

Furthermore, lack of transparency in electoral process is also a major challenge faced by democracy in Pakistan. Since 2002, Pakistan has held five consecutive general elections at regular intervals but none of the elected prime ministers could complete their term. None of those elections were free from allegations of organized electoral manipulations. In view of such allegations and in response to civil society demands, the political parties in the Parliament made extensive efforts to reform the electoral process, which culminated in the enactment of the Election Act, 2017. It empowered the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and strengthened the legal provisions to improve transparency and credibility of the electoral process.

Along with this, the

constitutional retrogression has also adversely impacted the democratic process in the country. In the last seven decades, for more than three decades the country was being ruled by dictators. Constitution was either abolished, for instance, the constitution of 1956 was abolished and new constitution of 1962 was adopted, or constitution was suspended as in 1977 and 1993. Sometimes, dictators brought needed amendments to tighten their grip on power, and article 58(2)b is a classical example of this.

Another significant obstacle in the way of democracy in Pakistan is the poor literacy rate in the state. Although, a significant improvement has been observed in literacy rate but still a major population of the country is illiterate. According to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2023-2024, the literacy rate in Pakistan stood 62.8%. The rate is higher for males (73%) than females (51%). In order to improve democracy in Pakistan, this disparity needs to be narrowed down.

Moreover, there is lack of civic responsibility in Pakistan which acts

as a major challenge to democracy in Pakistan. The role of civil society cannot be ignored in the development of a country in the modern era. But in Pakistan, the civil society is unable to perform its due role either due to lack of trust in political elites or due to illiteracy. The report by Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) showed that despite the increase in the absolute number of voters, the turnout dipped from 52% in 2018 to 47% in 2024.

Furthermore, the politicization of accountability institutions has also weakened the democratic system in Pakistan. Pakistan established numerous accountability systems to reduce corruption. However, Pakistan's performance in implementing accountability is poor. Pakistan has had the weaker vertical accountability over the years. As per World Bank report (2022), all values of voice and accountability index (VAI) were found to be less than zero, demonstrating that Pakistan has failed to implement strong vertical accountability.

In addition to this, media plays a significant role in shaping

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political opinions and party choices of voters as most of the people learn about politics through media.

The spread of misinformation and propaganda through media platforms especially through social media can have consequences in the real world especially during elections. The politicians and political activists manipulate the public opinion, influence the electoral outcomes, and undermine the integrity of democratic process. The biased role of media can also be seen through the affiliation of channels to specific political parties.

In a nutshell, it can be said that democracy in Pakistan has faced many ups and downs, and still it is facing a number of hurdles. However, these challenges can be catered through pragmatic approaches. The positive aspect of Pakistan's democracy is that there are still many reasons to be hopeful. These above mentioned reasons can lead to achieve democratic transparency as well as political stability in near future. Both of these factors are important for the development and prosperity of any country.