

Democratic Unrest in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

Outline:

I. Introduction

a) What is democratic Unrest?

Reference : Larry Diamond - an American scientist and sociologist

II. Overview of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

a) Pakistan faced 4 martial law periods.

III. Causes of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

a) Non-autonomous Judiciary

→ 26th and 27th Amendment,

→ World Justice Project's Rule of Law 2025 ranking

b) Throttling of Press Freedom

→ Amnesty International Report

→ Pakistan Press Foundation document

c) Erosion of democracy in elections

→ Access Now Report.

→ 2024 elections corruption.

d) Political Polarization and Populism

→ Liberal Democracy Index 2025

→ Zia and Musharraf's era policies

IV. Consequences of democratic Unrest

a) Weak Judiciary affects law enforcement and justice system.

b) Restricted Press Freedom is harmful for democratic Accountability.

c) Erosion of electoral democracy manifests an authoritarian regime.

d) Populism and political polarization give rise to strong division in society and threaten democracy

V. Future of Democracy in Pakistan

Case in point: Economist Intelligence Unit's

Democracy Index (EIU) 2025 classifies

Pakistan as "authoritarian regime" - 2.84 score

II. Conclusion

The Essay

Democracy is not merely a system of elections but a framework of ensuring rule of law, accountability, civil liberty and political participation. According to **Larry Diamond**, 'democratic unrest is a condition where democratic institutions exist formally but fail to deliver representation, justice, and legitimacy'. In Pakistan, a paradox of democratic structures and function exists. The structures of democracy can be found but soul or spirit of democracy remains fragile. Since the inception of Pakistan, democratic unrest is rooted in the government dealings. No politicians ever came to decide how to run the state of 796096 sq km. So, Pakistan faced four military rules and approximately 33 years under authoritarian regimes. Even after 2008, the effect of military-colored government did not fade away. In this

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regard, Pakistan faced severe democratic unrest phases that are inherited since its birth. However, democratic unrest in Pakistan stems from institutional imbalance, civil-military imbalanced relations, erosion of judicial and electoral integrity, militarization of governance, public alienation from policy making process, and control on digital media.

Abraham Lincoln said that, democracy is the most natural, the most just, and the most enlightened form of government. The very popular quote of Lincoln is:

**"Government of the people,
by the people, for the
people."**

The key pillars of democracy are free and fair elections, Judicial Independence, civil liberties, and civilian supremacy, but no pillar is free of corruption, coercion, and autocracy by government, in Pakistan. Although, Pakistan was made on the name of "Democratic Republic of Pakistan", but

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it operates not even under federal parliamentary democratic republic system. In contemporary era, Pakistan's progression towards authoritarianism can be seen. The authoritarian regime is not solely a recent phenomenon. The country has been bearing the consequences of martial law, placed under the "Doctrine of Necessity." From 1958 to 1969, General Ayub Khan emerged as the elected leader, following controversial elections against Fatima Jinnah. General ~~Ayub~~^{Yahya} Khan followed Ayub's authority, ruled an unstable political situation for two years until 1971. The policies of Yahya Khan responsible for the genocide of modern-day Bangladesh. Zia-ul-Haq followed, a leader responsible for enacting Islamization through various policies and country's support of Afghan Mujahideen. The last military rule was by Musharraf in 1999, after he drove out the then-prime minister Nawaz Sharif. In these years, Pakistan never experienced democracy or civilian

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rule - causes civil-military power imbalance
and resulted in democratic unrest for next
years.

The first and foremost cause of
democratic unrest in Pakistan is reduction
of autonomy of Judiciary of Pakistan.

According to **World Justice Project's
Rule of Law Index 2025**, Pakistan
ranks 130th out of 143 countries globally.

This low ranking indicates serious
institutional weaknesses in the justice
system. 26th Amendment in 2024 diluted
the powers of judiciary by enabling greater
executive and legislative leverage over
judicial appointments. Legal scholars argue that
the amendment indirectly restricted the
court's ability to challenge executive or
legislative actions. Similarly, 27th Amendment
added fuel to fire by allegedly disturbing
the balance between state and institutions.

Pakistan's **World Justice Project** ranking
places it among the least law-abiding

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nations. It means that democratic standards of Pakistan are in worse state. The 27th Amendment of Pakistan is a flagrant attack on the independency of judiciary and the rule of law, said by **International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)**. As a french philosopher, Montesquieu, stated that:

"There is no liberty if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive."

The second cause of democratic unrest in Pakistan is throttling of press freedom under military influence. According to **Amnesty International report** "Shadows of Control", Pakistan's web Monitoring System and Lawful Intercept Management System operates like watchtowers, texts, emails, calls, and internet access of ordinary citizens are under scrutiny. Other than ordinary civilians, Pakistani journalists work space is shrinking day by day. As

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democracy ensures freedom of speech and to live independently but Pakistani journalists are facing challenges on multiple fronts. For instance, year 2024 had emerged as one of the deadliest for journalists in Pakistan - 57 violations had been documented, highlighting the lack of actions from provincial governments against media related crimes, reported by **Freedom Network** in its "Imputing Report 2024." Between January and October, **Pakistan Press Foundation** (PPF) documented at least 137 confirmed attacks on journalists. On August 30, 2025 - Geo News journalists were assaulted and forcibly removed by personnel of the Punjab Enforcement and Regulatory Authority (PERA), while covering residents impacted by floods in Faisalabad. Keeping in view these statistics, journalism or human rights in Pakistan is dire. The **World Press Freedom Index** ranks Pakistan 158 out of 180 countries, **Freedom House's** 2025 report scores Pakistan 32/100, and for internet freedom Pakistan ranks 27/100, classifying

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it as "not free".

The third cause of democratic unrest is the erosion of electoral democracy in Pakistan. The primary purpose of elections is to elect a most suitable candidate through the vote of public. This ensures transparency, public freedom, and civil liberty without any discrimination. Yet, elections are perceived as procedural rituals in Pakistan rather than genuine representation. According to **Access Now** Report, Pakistan ranked among the highest for internet shutdowns ⁽²¹⁾ to suppress free expression of public. In 2024 elections, a clear corruption could be seen by allegedly alteration of election results forms. To rig the General Elections 2024, Patten had pointed out four Ds in its audit report: Delay of elections, Deny access to internet services, Detain opposition party leaders, and Destroy constitution's spirit, original ballot papers, and form 45 & 46s.

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Furthermore, 64 new election rigging methods were used in GE-24. The erosion of democratic structure in election is not just confined to vote or political leaders, Official Secret Act (OSA) have also directly impacted electoral democracy in Pakistan. The Act has shifted elections away from genuine public choice toward controlled outcomes such as clause 5, clause 7, and clause 6(A) of Act.

The fourth and final democratic unrest cause in Pakistan is political polarization and populism. Leaders of Pakistani political parties has often used populism as a political strategy to gain power. It delves into the narratives of people and creates guise under the pretense of "the people" versus "the corrupt elite". **Fareed Zakaria** stated that:

**"Elections without liberty
produce illiberal democracy."**

If we look back into history of Pakistan, the

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era of General Zia-ul-Haq created populism through islamization policies. In the contemporary era, the instance of former Prime Minister Imran Khan as the leader of the Youth emerged. Political polarization is the divergence of political attitudes away from the center, towards ideological extremes. In 1990s, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif's political parties created personality-centric politics and damaged the spirit of democratic government. Similarly, Musharraf's "Enlightened Moderation" polarized society between old politicians and reformists. Liberal Democracy Index of Pakistan was 0.199 in 2024 while world average is around 0.377. Same is the case with Pakistan's electoral democracy index, participatory democracy index, and egalitarian democracy index - all are comparatively low. Such low indices ranking depicts that Pakistan democratic quality remains low with weak participatory components.

The problems that causing demo-

cratic unrest in Pakistan bears severe social, governmental, and global consequences. The notable effect of non-autonomous judicial structure is the loss of trust of citizens on the institutes. World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2025 ranking put Pakistan at 130th position out of 143 countries world wide. The source indicating a very low and weak enforcement of law framework. Weak Judiciary means weak rule of law, that ultimately causes democratic unrest. There will be no government-works for the people, to the people, and by the people. The rule of law recession makes Pakistan ranks at 5th number out of 6 South Asian countries in the region. Moreover, legal amendments like 27th and 26th Amendment further politicized judicial appointments and consequences of such a huge gap, between making laws and implementing laws without proper checks and balances, is a question on the integrity of Judiciary. That is why, Pakistan's ranking is poor historically

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on Transparency International's corruption Perceptions Index.

Media is fourth pillar of any state. ~~Silent~~ journalism means no accountability in country, high crime rate, human rights abuse, no transparency, and concealment of evil face of society. In Pakistan, journalism is facing bad consequences since 77 years due to freedom of expression and speech. Restricted press freedom weakened the democratic accountability, people abuse people, rise in corruption, spread of propaganda, and political polarization. As Amartya Sen, an indian philosopher said:

A free press is the most powerful safeguard of democracy.

So, when 'free press' protection will no longer be safe and sound it mean the democratic unrest is an obvious output. Without journalists state actions, frauds, scandals, corruption remain buried. The restricted

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environment creates a culture of impunity.
The instances of **Panama Papers** are
very popular example of uncovering the
top corrupt personalities in the country.
Finally, due to lack of transparency,
Foreign direct investment of a country
affects badly.