

①

Democracy in Pakistan: Hopes and Hurdles

Outline

1 Introduction

1.1 Hook

1.2 General Statement

1.3 Thesis Statement:

Despite facing significant challenges, the hopes for democracy in Pakistan lie in the continued push for government accountability, inclusivity, and transparency, while the hurdles include political instability, social, economic, and administrative hurdles.

2 Hopes Restaining to Democracy in Pakistan at the moment

2.1 Political Hopes.

2.1.1 No military interventions

(2)

2.1.2 Increasing political awareness among the masses

2.1.3 Responsible role of politicians

2.2 Social hopes

2.2.1 Enhanced literacy rates

2.2.2 Substantive role of ~~men~~^{women}

2.2.3 Apparently more responsible role of judiciary

2.3 Administrative hopes

2.3.1 Engagement of military in counter-terrorism activities.

2.3.2 Revival of the institution of local government

2.3.2 Improving situation of national integration

2.4 Economic hopes

2.4.1 CPEC-related projects and funds

2.4.2 Improving economic indicators

(3)

3 Hurdles in the way of democracy in Pakistan

3.1 Political hurdles

3.1.1 Weak role of Election Commission of Pakistan

3.1.2 Absence of true democratic spirit in political parties

3.1.3 Lack of public interest in electoral process.

3.2.1 Irresponsible and short-sighted role of opposition.

3.2 Social hurdles

3.2.1 Illiteracy and low education

3.2.2 Increasing poverty

3.2.3 Irresponsible and media-driven role of media

3.3 Administrative hurdles

3.3.1 Corrupt, unpatriotic and unprofessional role of bureaucracy,

3.3.2 Class of institutions

3.4 Economic hurdles

3.4.1 Deteriorating situation of economic growth

3.4.2 ~~Increasing~~ ^{Increasing} foreign debts.

3.4.3 Destabilization of currency

4 ~~Conclusion~~ Way forward for strong and ~~deep~~ deep rooted democracy

4.1 Establishing strong democratic institutions

4.2 Promoting political stability and inclusiveness

4.3 Promoting good governance and accountability

4.4 Safeguarding democracy from external and internal threats.

4.5 Ensuring socio-economic development

5 Conclusion



(5)

The 16th President of the United States of America Abraham Lincoln in the 1863 once said, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth." Since the dawn of independence in 1947, democracy in the country has been witnessing both hopes and hurdles. The founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was keen to introduce democratic system in Pakistan. However, its sudden death impeded its proper imposition. Unfortunately, despite the hopes ^{of the country's founder,} of ~~the~~ Pakistan had been dealing with a difficult path towards consolidating a democratic and representative political culture. The civilian political process has been repeatedly disrupted and derailed. Surprisingly, the country's constitution has been disregarded and set aside twice

⑥

(in 1958 and 1969) and suspended three times (in 1977, 1999, and 2007).

For most of its existence the country has been ruled directly or indirectly by the military and as the nation has just elected a new government. After the

8th February, 2024, elections democracy in Pakistan has faced hopes, fears

and hurdles. Despite facing significant challenges, the hopes for democracy in Pakistan lie in the continued

push for government accountability, inclusivity, and transparency, while the hurdles includes political

instability, social, economic, and administrative hurdles.

(7)

A major hope for democracy in Pakistan lies in the fact the political ~~factor~~ affairs are improving. Firstly, there would be no martial laws, so military will not come forward to impose its direct rule by dismantling the democratic system, as it did in past. For example, Pakistan has witnessed a smooth transition of power in three democratic governments since 2008. It is for the first time that three democratic governments have successfully completed their tenure. Thus, the lack of military intervention holds strengthening democracy in Pakistan. Secondly, increasing political awareness among the masses is a pivotal hope for democracy in Pakistan. When citizens are well-informed about their rights, the functioning of government institutions,

⑧

and the impact of their participation in electoral processes, they become empowered stakeholders in the democratic process. This awareness not only enhances accountability but also strengthens

democratic institutions by promoting transparency and inclusivity. Lastly, the responsible role of politicians stands as a beacon of hope for democracy in Pakistan. When elected leaders prioritize public welfare, uphold democratic values, and demonstrate integrity in their governance, they inspire trust and confidence among citizens. For instance, leaders who advocate for fair electoral practices and respect for democratic institutions contribute significantly to stabilizing the country's democratic framework. By upholding these

9

principles, politicians can address societal issues effectively and promote a sustainable democratic future for Pakistan.

Besides political affairs, there are social factors which are also a hope for better democracy in Pakistan. Firstly, improving literacy rates in Pakistan holds significant promise for the country's democratic future. A literate population is better equipped to make informed decisions, actively participate in democratic processes, and hold leaders accountable. For example, the success of the Punjab Education Reforms Program (PERP) illustrates the positive impact of educational initiatives. As a result, literacy rates in Punjab saw a notable increase, leading to a

(10)

more informed electorate. The progress seen in Punjab provides a hopeful model for the rest of the country.

Secondly, increasing the role of women in Pakistan's political, economic and social sectors is pivotal for the country's democratic development.

Empowering women leads to more inclusive governance, economic growth, and social progress. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, Pakistan is ranked at 93

among 153 countries in women's political empowerment where 20.2% of women are legislators, whereas 12% of women are appointed at ministerial positions. Thirdly, an

increasingly responsible judiciary is a crucial pillar for the sustenance and growth of democracy in

(11)

Pakistan. The judiciary in Pakistan has recently played a constructive role in safeguarding democracy by upholding the Constitution, ensuring accountability, and promoting justice. For instance, Justice Yahya Afridi's appointment as Chief Justice under the 26th constitutional Amendment ^{in October 2021,} showcased the judiciary's adaptability to constitutional changes while maintaining its institutional integrity.

Similarly, administrative factors, which ^{also} plays an important role in the democracy of Pakistan. Firstly, the military's active role in counter-terrorism in Pakistan can positively impact democracy by ensuring security and stability. For example, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in

(2)

2014, was a successful campaign that targeted militant groups in North Waziristan, helping to reduce violence and create a safer environment for civilians. Secondly, the revival of local government institutions in Pakistan is a crucial step toward strengthening democracy and promoting grassroots participation. Local government empowers citizens to have a say in their communities and make decisions on issues like education, health, and infrastructure.

According to the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, during the 2022 floods in Pakistan, local governments played a crucial role in disaster response by coordinating relief efforts and engaging with communities to address immediate needs.

(13)

Lastly, improving national integration in Pakistan is vital for the country's democratic stability and unity.

National integration is a centripetal social force that develops a sense of oneness among the different individuals and groups of society.

As an illustration, the 18th Amendment in 2010 aimed to empower provinces and promote a shared national identity. Strengthening national unity is essential for a vibrant democracy and effective governance in Pakistan.

Another hope for democracy in Pakistan is its economic factors. Firstly, CPEC-related projects and funds present a significant opportunity for improving democracy in Pakistan by boosting

economic development and creating jobs.

For instance, the Gwadar Port development aims to enhance trade and connectivity, which can stimulate local economies.

These projects not only promote economic growth but also encourage regional stability and integration. Secondly,

improving economic indicators in

Pakistan is a key hope for

strengthening democracy and fostering

stability. Positive trends in GDP

growth, inflation control, and increasing

foreign investment can lead to greater

public trust in democratic institutions.

As an illustration, in recent years, initiatives aimed at boosting the agriculture and

technology sectors have shown

promising results, contributing to

job creation and economic

resilience. A healthier economy

(15)

can empower citizens and encourage greater participation in the democratic process.

Democracy in Pakistan is influenced by various interrelated factors, including political instability from frequent leadership changes and social challenges like inequality and ethnic divisions. Economic initiatives like CPEC offer growth potential but raise concerns about dependency and governance. Additionally, administrative inefficiencies complicate the democratic landscape, creating a complex environment for progress.

There are several political factors which became hurdle in the way of development of democracy in Pakistan. Firstly, in Pakistan,

(16)

democracy faces significant challenges particularly due to the weak role of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

The ECP plays a crucial role in ensuring free and fair elections, but its effectiveness has been undermined

by various factors. For instance, during the general elections of 2024,

there were widespread allegations of irregularities and claims of the ECP's failure to address them

adequately. Furthermore, the ECP has often been accused of being influenced by political pressures and lacking the autonomy to enforce electoral laws impartially. Secondly, lack of

public interest in the electoral process is one of the major hurdles in democracy of Pakistan. Many citizens often feel disconnected from politics and elections,

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which are crucial for shaping the country's future. This lack of interest can be seen in low voter turnout during elections, where many eligible voters do not participate. As an illustration, in recent elections voter turnout has been lower than expected, indicating a growing apathy or disillusionment among the public towards political engagement. Lastly, in Pakistan, another hurdle to democracy is the irresponsible and short-sighted role often played by the opposition parties. For example, during budget sessions or important policy debates, opposition parties have been known to disrupt proceedings rather than engage in meaningful dialogue.

Along with political hurdles, there are many social hurdles which affect the

democracy in Pakistan. Firstly, one of the significant social hurdles to democracy is high levels of illiteracy. Illiteracy refers to the lack of basic reading and writing skills, which can limit people's ability to understand political issues, make informed choices, and participate effectively in democratic processes like voting. Many Pakistanis, especially in rural areas and among marginalized communities, face barriers to accessing education, which perpetuates the cycle of illiteracy. For example, according to UNESCO, Pakistan has one of the highest adult illiteracy rates in the world. Secondly, in Pakistan, poverty is a major social hurdle to democracy. Poverty refers to the lack of basic necessities like food, shelter, and healthcare, which affects millions of people across

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the country. When people struggle, with poverty, they often prioritize survival over political participation and engagement. For example, many poor Pakistanis face challenges in accessing education and healthcare, which are crucial for understanding and participating in democratic processes. Lastly, another social hurdle to democracy is the irresponsible and motive-driven role sometimes played by the media. For instance, during elections or political crises, certain media channels may focus more on promoting one view point over others, which can polarize society and reduce trust in democratic institutions.

Another major hurdle in the democracy of Pakistan is the administrative

Sector huddles. Firstly, in Pakistan, the functioning of democracy faces various challenges due to the corrupt, unpatriotic, and unprofessional behavior of some bureaucrats. Bureaucracy, which is meant to be an impartial and efficient administrative body, often becomes a source of inefficiency and injustice. For instance, in the case of the Punjab Public Service Commission (PPSC) in 2020, it was revealed that several officials were involved in leaking examination papers and manipulating recruitment processes. This scandal highlighted how corruption within the bureaucracy can undermine meritocracy, erode public trust, and impede the fair implementation of democratic principles. Such actions not only damage the integrity of

(21)

institutions but also hinder the progress of democracy in the country. Secondly, in Pakistan, democracy is often hindered by the class divide within institutions. This means that there are significant differences in the quality and accessibility of services provided by various public institutions. For example, government schools in rural areas often lack basic facilities, trained teachers, and proper infrastructure, while urban private schools offer high-quality education and resources. Such inequality within institutions prevents fair participation in democratic processes and widens the gap between different social classes, making it harder for democracy to function effectively.

(11)

Besides administrative hurdles, Pakistan's democracy also struggles due to the worsening state of its economy. Firstly, a weak economy makes it hard for the government to provide essential services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. For instance, the rising inflation in recent years has led to higher prices for everyday goods, making life difficult for ordinary people. This economic strain causes frustration among citizens, leading to protests and instability. When people are struggling to meet their basic needs, they are less likely to trust and support democratic processes. Secondly, another major economic challenge to democracy in Pakistan is the increasing foreign debt. The country has borrowed large sums of money from international lenders like the

(23)

International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to support its economy. For instance, in 2024, Pakistan secured a \$7 billion bailout package from the IMF to stabilize its financial situation. However, these loans come with strict conditions, such as cutting public spending and increasing taxes, which can lead to public discontent. As the government prioritizes debt repayment, it has fewer resources to invest in essential services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This situation causes frustration among citizens, undermining their trust in democratic institutions and processes. Thirdly, destabilization of currency is the another economic hurdle in Pakistan's democracy. When the value of the Pakistani rupee falls sharply,

(24)

against other currencies, it cause prices of imported goods, like fuel and food to rise. For example, in 2020, the rupee lost significant value against the US dollar, leading to higher costs for essential imports. This makes everyday life more expensive for ordinary people, creating economic stress and frustration. As a result, people may lose confidence in the government's ability to manage the economy effectively, which undermines their trust in democratic processes and institutions. A stable currency is crucial for economic stability, which in turn supports a healthy democracy.

(25)

A strong democracy in Pakistan requires the establishment of robust democratic institutions. These institutions, such as the judiciary, parliament, and election commission, must be independent and functional to ensure a fair and transparent political system. The judiciary should be free from political interference, ensuring that laws are upheld impartially. The parliament needs to be efficient, with members committed to representing the people, passing laws that benefit the public, and holding the government accountable. An independent election commission is necessary to conduct free and fair elections, which form the foundation of democracy. In addition to strong

institutions, political stability and inclusiveness are key for democracy to flourish. All political parties, regardless of their size or power, must have a platform to participate in the decision-making process. The political system should be inclusive, allowing all ethnic, religious, and regional groups to have a voice, preventing the alienation of any community.

Similarly, good governance and accountability are crucial elements in strengthening Pakistan's democracy. Elected officials must serve the public's interests by ensuring transparency, fairness, and responsibility in their actions. Anti corruption mechanisms, such as an empowered National

(3)

Accountability Bureau (NAB), should hold politicians and public officials accountable for any misuse of power or resources. This will help restore public trust in the system and promote efficient governance. Moreover, safeguarding democracy from both external and internal threats is vital for its survival. Pakistan faces external challenges from geopolitical tensions, as well as internal threats from extremism and political unrest. By focusing on poverty alleviation, improving education, creating jobs, and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens, Pakistan can create an environment where people are empowered to actively participate in democratic processes.

When citizens feel secure and supported, they are more likely to engage in democracy, leading to a stronger, more stable society.

In conclusion, democracy in Pakistan faces numerous challenges, including administrative inefficiencies, corruption, economic instability, and increasing foreign debts. These hurdles hinder the proper functioning of democratic institutions and erode public trust. However, there is still hope for a brighter future. With determined efforts to combat corruption, reform institutions, and stabilize the economy, Pakistan can overcome these challenges. By fostering

29

transparency, accountability, and
inclusive governance, the country
can strengthen its democratic
foundations and pave the way
for a more prosperous and
democratic future.



• The end.