

# Protest Culture of Pakistan and Its Impacts

## Outline

### 1. Introduction

#### Thesis Statement:

Protest culture in Pakistan fosters social change and political awareness but faces challenges like government repression and division, necessitating solutions such as dialogue, strengthened institutions, civil protections and a commitment to peaceful dissent.

2. Protest; a fundamental right
3. Protest Culture in Pakistan
4. Forms of Protest
5. Objectives of protests held over time

- a. Political Objectives
- b. Economic Objectives
- c. Social Objectives
- d. Religious Objectives

### 6. Impacts of Protests on the Development of Pakistan

#### a. Positive Impacts.

- i. Public Awakening
- ii. Improved Accountability
- iii. ~~Impro~~ Check on State Power and Corruption.
- iv. Assertion of Rights
- v. Civic Participation and social change.

## b. Negative Impacts

- i - Political Impacts
- ii - Economic Impacts
- iii - Social Impacts
- iv - Administrative Impacts

## 7. How do protests cause instability and incite violence

- a. Reactive Approach of the Government
- b. Absence of Rule of law
- c. Prevalence of Pressure Groups
- d. Foreign Interference
- e. Negative Role of Leaders
- f. Poorly functioning Law Enforcement Agencies
- g. Illiteracy and Unemployment
- h. Sensationalist Reporting of Media House.

## 8. How to stop this culture from growing?

- a. Addressing Public Grievances before they Escalate
- b. Strict Implementation of laws
- c. Eliminating Power Groups
- d. Mature Political Leadership
- e. Strengthening LEAs
- f. Promoting Education
- g. Implementing a strict Code of Conduct for media

## 9. Conclusion-

Protest culture serves as a mirror reflecting the aspirations, frustrations and demands of a society. Throughout history, protests have been pivotal in challenging injustices and advocating for change, embodying the spirit of collective action. As the eminent social activist Howard Zinn once stated, "Protest is the voice of the unheard." In recent years, the landscape of protest culture has evolved globally, with movements arising in response to political oppression, economic inequality and social injustices. From the Arab Spring to the Women's March, these demonstrations have highlighted the power of ordinary citizens to cause change. <sup>Similarly,</sup> In Pakistan, the culture of protest has gained momentum, manifesting in various forms such as sit-ins, rallies, strikes and blockades. These actions not only reflect discontent but also serve as a platform for marginalized voices seeking recognition and reform. However, the impacts of these protest in Pakistan are multifaceted, encompassing both negative and positive dimension. On one hand, protests can lead to significant advancements in accountability, transparency and social awareness; as citizens demand their rights and challenge the status quo. On the other hand, they can result in political instability, economic disruptions and social unrest, often tarnishing the image of the state and diverting attention from essential governance issues. Protest culture in Pakistan fosters social change and political awareness but faces challenges like government repression and division, necessitating solutions such as

dialogue, civil liberty, protections and a commitment to peaceful dissent.

"Peaceful protest is a right, not a privilege."

The right to protest is enshrined as a fundamental freedom both in Pakistan's Constitution and in key international human rights instruments. Article 16 of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees every citizen the right to peaceful assembly, subject to reasonable restrictions in the interest of public order. Internationally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), under Article 20, affirms the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Likewise, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Pakistan is a signatory, upholds this right in Article 21. These legal safeguards recognize protest as a legitimate form of democratic expression and civic participation. In essence, the ability of citizens to raise their voices, demand justice, and hold authorities accountable through peaceful protest is not only a constitutional entitlement but a cornerstone of global human rights norms.

Protest culture in Pakistan has evolved from isolated voices of dissent into widespread, organized expressions of collective frustration. Whether led by political parties, civil rights groups, religious factions or student movements, protests have become a central feature of the country's sociopolitical fabric. They reflect deep public dissatisfaction with governance, inequality, inflation and institutional failure. On ~~the~~<sup>one</sup> ~~other~~ hand, these movements

energize democratic engagement by forcing accountability and giving a platform to marginalized voices. On the other hand, increasingly frequent and disruptive nature of these protests has blurred the lines between democratic right and political instability. They often paralyze cities and undermine public trust in peaceful means. Thus, this culture in Pakistan pulses with both promise and peril - it signals a politically conscious nation, yet also exposes the fragility of state-societal dialogue.

"Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it."

~ Howard Zinn.

Protests in Pakistan takes on a variety of forms, reflecting the diverse ways in which citizens express dissent and demand change. Peaceful rallies and marches remain the most common, often organized by political parties, civil society groups and students to raise awareness or press for reforms. Sit-ins or dharnas, are another popular method, frequently used to exert prolonged pressure on the government, as seen in major political movements like the PTI's 2014 Islamabad sit-in. However, not all protests remain peaceful, violent demonstrations, including arson, vandalism, and clashes with law enforcement, erupt when public frustration boils over or when protests are hijacked by extremist elements. In recent years, online and digital protests have also emerged, with hashtags, digital campaigns and

virtual activism playing a growing role in mobilizing support and highlighting issues. The most common example of such protests include the #MeToo movement, Justice for Palestine or ~~any~~ <sup>other</sup> protests against harassment incidents.

Given the variety of protest forms, it is evident that the underlying motivations often stem from broader political, economic, social and religious objectives. Politically, protests serve as a powerful tool for influencing governmental decisions, enacting or abrogating laws, and pressuring ruling parties to address public concerns. For instance, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's 2014 sit-in at D-Chowk was not just a display of political power but a strategic attempt to demand electoral transparency and early elections, highlighting how protests can destabilize the incumbent government and shift the political narrative. Such demonstrations highlight the public's demand for the provision of fundamental rights and accountability from their leaders; reflecting a dynamic political landscape driven by collective civic action (Dawn newspaper).

Economically, the protests centre around labor rights, inflation control, and tax reforms. Workers' union frequently organize strikes demanding better wages and improved workplace conditions. For instance, recent protests by government employees in Pakistan have pushed for salary increases amidst rising inflation; reflecting the socioeconomic pressures faced by <sup>the</sup> working class. Additionally, protests by farmers demanding subsidies or tax relief on

agricultural products, illustrate the populations economic grievances and their impact on national economic policies.

P The 2024 sit-in in Gilgit Baltistan, protesting against the removal of subsidies on wheat is a manifestation of how economic objective lead to protests.

Moreover, protests in Pakistan may also depend upon social objectives, where protestors focus on issues such as justice for marginalized communities or individuals, law enforcement reforms and improving the standard of living. Movements like Aurat March, #MeToo, Justice for Zainab etc, address gender inequality, harassment and rape cases faced by women. Similarly, protests following the incidents of police brutality or social injustice have aimed to expedite the criminal justice process and bring attention to systemic failures. These movements play a critical role in societal transformation, fostering awareness and prompting legal and administrative reforms.

Other than that, there are some religious objectives for which protests stem out. Groups like Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan have organised various processions to defend religious blasphemy laws or express solidarity with religious leaders. Such protests can escalate into national crises, affecting diplomatic relations and internal security. The recent wave of protests in response to perceived blasphemous acts have led to significant disruptions, including road blockades and clashes with law enforcement, reflecting the

deep intertwining of religion and politics in Pakistan. Political analyst Zahid Hussain states ~~that~~, "The state's failure to balance religious sensitivities with democratic governance can lead to both political instability and international scrutiny." (Dawn)

In the light of these objectives, the impacts of protests on Pakistan's development are multifaceted. There are both positive and negative impacts of this protest culture. While the objectives of protest movements often revolve around justice, representation and reform, their broader <sup>positive</sup> impacts extend far beyond immediate demands reshaping society, governance, and democratic norms in meaningful ways. Protest culture serves as a powerful catalyst for public awakening in Pakistan, mobilizing citizens beyond traditional political circles. As Howard Zinn rightly stated, "Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it." The 2007-09 Lawyers' Movement is a prime example: what began as the bar's defence of Chief Justice, quickly drew in students, journalists, and ordinary citizens across urban centres. Similarly, the annual Students' Solidarity March rekindled political engagement among youth, demonstrating in over 50 cities with demands ranging from educational reforms to gender rights. Findings published in the Daily Times even describe this phenomenon as "the seed for actual 'Naya Pakistan'" — a sign of revived civic agency.

Building upon this political awakening, protests press leadership towards accountability, reinforcing democratic values via public scrutiny. For instance, the Lawyers' Movement compelled restoration of the judiciary and sparked significant judicial activism, with the Supreme Court annulling both Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO)

and The National Reconciliation Order (NRO) orders as indicated by ~~the~~ the journal of Pakistan Study Centre. That movement also prompted widespread debate and extensive media coverage, raising the stakes for political decorum. Similarly, Student Solidarity marches drew government support - including tweets by former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan promising reinstatement of student unions under regulated conditions - thereby holding leadership to its democratic commitments.

Moreover, protests force transparency and reconfigure state-society power dynamics. Protests compel state and non-state actors alike to justify their positions under public gaze, raising the value of transparency in governance. Political analyst Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani emphasizes in Jahangir World Times magazine that public demonstrations often act as a catalyst for holding those in power accountable for their actions. Moreover, protests enhance transparency and accountability within governance structures. The anti-corruption rallies in 2016, aimed at exposing political corruption led to significant reforms, including greater scrutiny of public officials. As highlighted by The Economist magazine, 'Civil unrest, when strategically executed, forces governments to adopt open governance practices, ensuring that decisions are made in the public ~~eye~~ eye. This transparency fosters trust between the government and the populace, strengthening democratic institutions. Mass demonstrations often act as a bulwark against corruption and executive overreach. The Lawyer's Movement challenged Musharraf's power grab and sowed the seeds for judicial independence. Later political marches like the Ihtisab movement - brought corruption scandals (such as Panama Papers revelations) into public scrutiny, eventually prompting

legal consequences.

Additionally, protests often lead to <sup>the</sup> provision of rights, particularly for marginalized communities. Movements advocating for land reforms, labor rights, minority protection and gender equality have resulted in significant policy changes over the years. For instance, the protests by farmers in Punjab demanding fair crop prices led to the introduction of support policies that benefitted small-scale farmers. Renowned Sociologist Arif Hassan argues, "Historically, protests have been instrumental in securing fundamental rights, transforming social justice into actionable policies."

In parallel, Pakistan's youth have increasingly used protest as a tool to assert civic participation and changing societal narratives. Protests also amplify voices from Pakistan's fringes - ethnic minorities, forced disappearances, and survivors of massacres. Student-based campus protests have highlighted the stories of those previously ignored. As stated by Dr. Nida Karamani "Protests act as a platform for marginalized voices, raising awareness and pushing for societal reforms."

Contrary to the positive impacts, there are some negative impacts of this protest culture that affect the development of Pakistan. Politically, the government's attention is often diverted from governance to managing crises that often lead to political instability; tarnishing the state's image on both domestic and international fronts. The diversion of government attention from policy making to crisis management weakens governance and impairs democratic process. For instance, the prolonged sit-ins

and political marches like those held by PTI in 2023 disrupted ③ Parliamentary functions. Frequent lockdown of Islamabad has undermined confidence in democratic institutions, hampering the day-to-day activities of the people. Additionally, human rights violations, such as ~~the~~ police brutality during protests as the one witnessed in November, 2024 protest of PTI supporters. Police opened direct fire on the protesters which killed hundreds of protesters. Such attitude erodes democratic values, painting a grim picture of governance. According to the Political Analyst Zahid Hussain, "Protests, when mishandled, push states into <sup>adopting</sup> authoritarian measures, eroding democratic norms."

Economically, protests drain the resources of a state and disrupt ~~the~~ business activities leading to <sup>a</sup>rise in inflation and a decline in foreign and local investments. Road blockades by political or religious parties results in the parties consuming a lot of resources that leads to hampered supply chains, bringing commercial hubs to a standstill that causes massive losses across multiple sectors. like business meetings, job interviews, weddings or most importantly a ~~foreign~~ meeting with a foreigner. Economist Shahid Javed Bukhari emphasizes in The News, "Frequent ~~disruptions~~ frequent disruptions deter foreign direct investments and delay critical economic reforms, pushing the country into fiscal instability."

On the social front, protests often create psychological unrest and foster an environment of lawlessness. This unrest disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, disrupts education, and increase crime rates. Schools and universities are often closed during major demonstrations, affecting students' academic

progress. Moreover, the increase in crime during such periods, as reported in various cities, exacerbates public anxiety. Social unrest, Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy notes, 'Societal unrest born from unresolved grievances not only hampers social cohesion but also incites criminal behaviour, creating long term societal fractures.'

Administratively, protests delay public services and disrupt official discipline. Essential services, such as healthcare, suffer when roads are blocked, preventing ambulances and patients from reaching hospitals. This disruption is evident in cases where even basic law enforcement is stretched thin, focusing more on crowd control than on maintaining law and order.

The impacts of protests both negative and positive are often shaped by underlying reasons that drive people to the streets. One prominent reason is the reactive approach of the government. Instead of addressing grievances proactively, authorities often respond only after tensions have escalated. This delay in action fosters frustration among the populace. As <sup>the</sup> political analyst Rasool Bakhsh Rais notes, "Governments in Pakistan has historically failed to implement timely reforms, pushing citizens towards streets." When citizens feel ignored, they view protests as the viable avenue for change.

Moreover, the absence of rule of law further exacerbates the situation. When people perceive that justice is selectively applied or delayed, they lose faith in the judicial system and turn to protests for redress. According to The News, "The erosion of trust in judicial institutions compels citizens to seek justice through public demonstration."

Without consistent enforcement of laws, societal unrest becomes markable. ⑥

Additionally, the prevalence of pressure group play a significant role in promoting the protest culture. These pressure groups often mobilize protests to exert influence on the state. While some pressure group genuinely represent public, others exploit the public concern to further their own agendas. Economist Dr. Ishrat Hussain argues that Pressure groups in Pakistan often distort genuine demands into political leverage, complicating governance. "This manipulation of public sentiments by powerful groups heightens tensions and destabilizes the political landscape."

Moreover, the involvement of foreign hands also complicates the protest landscape. External actors have historically used internal unrest to weaken state institutions or promote their geopolitical interests. For instance, allegations of foreign funding in various protests have surfaced in recent years, raising concerns about external interference. Such interference undermines the credibility of legitimate protests and stirs national insecurity.

Furthermore, the negative role of leaders in exploiting public sentiments for personal or political gains cannot be overlooked. Politicians often incite protests to destabilize opponents or shift public focus from governance failures. As Ayesha Jalal in The Struggle for Pakistan states, "Political leaders in Pakistan have historically manipulated popular discontent to serve ~~Pakistan~~ partisan objectives, further eroding public trust." This exploitation breeds cynicism and weakens democratic processes, as protests become tools of political rivalry rather than genuine social reforms.

Incapacity within law enforcement agencies (LEAs) also fuels protests. Poor training, lack of resources, and political interference often renders LEAs ineffective in managing protests peacefully. His mishandling of demonstrations, such as excessive use of force or arbitrary arrests, frequently escalate tensions. A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2023) noted, "The inefficiency of law enforcement agencies in managing peaceful assemblies, leads to unnecessary violence, deepening public resentment."

Moreover, illiteracy and unemployment create a fertile ground for unrest. With limited access to education and employment, many feel excluded from societal progress, leading to frustration and eventual mobilization. According to a 2024 Dawn report, youth unemployment in Pakistan remains alarmingly high at 10%, making the younger population particularly vulnerable to radicalization and protests. Akbar Zaidi argues, "when economic opportunities are scarce, protests become an outlet for socio-economic grievances."

Finally, the proactive role of media amplifies unrest. Sensationalist reporting often inflames public sentiments, transforming localized grievances into national crisis. While media plays a critical role in highlighting injustices, its tendency to prioritize controversy over accuracy can exacerbate tensions. Media scholar Zafer Abbas contends that, "irresponsible media coverage often fuels societal divisions turning protests into spectacles rather than platform for constructive dialogue."

To mitigate the negative impacts of protests and reduce their frequency, a proactive approach by the government is essential.

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by anticipating public grievances and addressing them before they  
escalate, authorities can prevent unrest. This involves setting  
up mechanisms for public consultations and redressal. Political  
analyst Rasul Bakhsh Rais suggests that "effective communication  
channels between the government and the public can defuse  
tensions before they lead to protests. For example, an early resolution  
of wage disputes or addressing public service complaints could  
deter workers and citizens from resorting to demonstration.

Moreover, strict implementation of laws is crucial to  
maintaining order. When laws are enforced uniformly, trust in  
state institutions strengthens, reducing the perceived need for  
public agitation. According to a 2023 The News report, inconsistent  
law enforcement fuels perception of inequality and injustice, which  
often become catalysts for protests. As Asma Jehangir once stated,  
"A state that enforces law equitably ensures justice and  
curtails dissent."

Furthermore, eliminating power groups as they emerge  
is necessary to maintain democratic integrity. Groups that exploit  
public sentiments for personal gains or political leverage should  
be identified and neutralized through legal means. As the Economist  
Dr. Ishtat Hussain states, "Unchecked power groups undermine state's  
authority, making governance difficult and protests inevitable.

However, the maturity of political leadership plays an  
equally significant role. Politicians must prioritize national security over  
personal gains, avoiding the rhetoric that incites unrest. Encouraging  
bipartisan dialogue and consensus building can also ease political  
tensions and prevent protests aimed at destabilizing governments.

Additionally, depoliticizing and strengthening LEAs is important. When these LEAs operate independently of political influence, their effectiveness in managing protests peacefully improves. A 2023 HRCP report noted that "politically compromised LEAs often escalate rather than de-escalate tension during protests".

A long term solution lies in focusing on education and character building. Educating the public about civic responsibilities and peaceful conflict resolution can diminish the appeal of disruptive protests. According to UNESCO's 2024 report, "Higher literacy rates correlate with reduced incidents of violent protests".

Moreover, designing and implementing a strict code of conduct for media is essential. By enforcing ethical journalism standards, the government can mitigate the media's role in escalating undue protests. A responsible media that prioritizes factual reporting over sensationalism can guide public discourse constructively.

In a nutshell, it can be stated that addressing the root causes of protests (that turn violent) or cause instability can create a more stable and peaceful Pakistan. While they provide a platform for addressing grievances and promoting accountability, their negative impacts cannot be overlooked. The key lies in striking a balance between safeguarding the right to protest and ensuring national stability. Through proactive governance, strict law enforcement, depoliticized institutions, the frequency of protests and their negative impacts can be mitigated. Ultimately fostering a culture of dialogue and trust between the state and its citizens will ensure that Pakistan progresses on a path of peace, development and democracy.