

Polarized Politics: The Issues and Challenges of Democracy in Pakistan

Outline

1. Introduction

Thesis Statement: The Polarized Politics in Pakistan has persistently obstructed democratic development, creating governance paralysis, institutional decay, and legitimacy crisis. However, it can be addressed through institutional reforms and consensus-building measures.

2. Nature of Polarized Politics

3. History of Polarized Politics in Pakistan

4. Drivers of Polarized Politics in Pakistan

- (i) Civil-Military Imbalance and Repeated Interruptions in democracy
- (ii) Dynastic Politics and Personalization of Leadership
- (iii) Media Sensationalization and Social Media Disinformation
- (iv) Judiciary Activism and Selective Accountability

5. Issues Emerged from Polarized Politics

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- (ii) Erosion of Parliamentary Supremacy
- (iii) Public Disillusionment

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"Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried." — Winston Churchill.

This remark underlines the paradox of democracy: While imperfect, it remains the only system capable of ensuring representation and accountability. In Pakistan, however, democracy has struggled to mature due to deep-rooted political polarization. Rivalries between parties, institutions and ideologies disrupted governance and decayed institutions. Polarization has transformed politics into a zero-sum contest, undermining dialogues and consensus. The polarized politics in

Pakistan has persistently obstructed democratic development, creating governance paralysis, institutional decay, and legitimacy crisis.

Polarization refers to the rigid division of the political actors and society into antagonistic camps unwilling to compromise. In healthy democracies, competition strengthens accountability, but when pushed to extremes, it disrupts governance. Globally, polarization has even strained advanced democracies, such as United States where partisan divisions triggered multiple governments shut downs.

In Pakistan, polarization destroys in a new form as it is not only rooted in political parties but

also in civil-military imbalance, dynastic politics, and judicial activism. Thus, it is more lethal to fragile democracy of Pakistan.

The seeds of Polarization had sown in Pakistan at the time of Independence. Pakistan inherited centralized colonial bureaucracy but lacked strong representation of institutions. Unlike India, where Congress party had fostered inclusive politics for decades, Pakistan's Muslim League was weak in many provinces, undermining political foundation. Early leaders failed to create the culture of consensus and dialogue, leaving no space for inclusivity. Polarization in

Pakistan is not a recent phenomenon but a legacy of elite-driven politics and weak institutions.

One of the major driver of polarized politics in Pakistan is military dominance over civilian politics. With the coups of 1958, 1977, and 1999, the democratic continuity was repeatedly interrupted.

Politicians, instead of relying on consensus, often turned to military patronage to dislodge rivals. For instance, during General Musharraf's era, opposition members spent more time in exile than in parliament. The political scientist Hamza Alvi noted, Pakistan is a "overdeveloped State",

ensured civilian institutes remain underdeveloped, perpetuating instability. Thus, civil-military imbalance translating into polarization.

Another driver of polarized politics in Pakistan is dominance of dynastic politics. Political parties in Pakistan function like family enterprises rather than democratic organizations. Leadership passed down through bloodline instead of meritocratic processes, causing disagreements within parties. Furthermore, personality driven politics has shifted the political discourse from programmatic agendas to the charisma of individual. The personalization of leadership fosters blind loyalty among

Supporters and animosity towards opponents. This results into less of accountability.

Media, which once hailed as "a fourth pillar of democracy" has paradoxically worsened the polarization in Pakistan. Since the liberalization of electronic media in 2002, the sensational talk shows prioritize ratings over responsible journalism. Political debates often turn into shouting matches. Social media further amplified the problems by creating echo chambers where misinformation thrives. The sit-in of past government in 2014 exemplifies how exaggerated coverage changed the narrative of public around electoral rigging. Also, 2022-23 political crisis saw

How misinformation on social media aggravated divisions. Thus, unregulated media leads to polarization.

The role of judiciary also fueled polarization. Instead of serving as an impartial arbiter, courts in Pakistan has merged by partisan landmark cases illustrate this trend, from the execution of Bhutto in 1979 to disqualification of former prime minister in 2017. Each decision deepened the division. Furthermore, the accountability bodies are often accused of targeting opposition leaders and sparing the allies of ruling elite. This selective accountability erodes public trust in

institutions. Thus, judicial activism and selective accountability worsen polarization.

The polarized politics translates into governance paralysis and policy deadlocks. Opposition leaders often resort to boycotts, resignations and protests instead of engaging in parliamentary debate. The 2014 sit-in of a political party led to legislative dysfunction and economic damage. Similarly, in recent years from 2022 to 2023 political crisis saw parliament overshadowed by protests and confrontations, delaying negotiation with IMF. Such deadlocks not only damage democracy but also deter investor confidence.

When political leaders prioritize personal interests over national interests, democracy weakens more.

The parliament, which should embody democratic deliberation, often disintegrates into a battleground for partisan hostilities. Walkouts, verbal abuse and personal attacks disrupt parliamentary processes, while debates on education, health and economy get sidelined. Data from National Assembly Secretariat reveals that between 2023-24, opposition members staged over a dozen walkouts, undermining parliamentary proceedings. This culture disrupts decision making and consensus building which ultimately results in polarization.

The Polarized politics also cause public empathy towards democratic processes. Citizens, exposed to endless political bickering, lose faith in political parties and institutions. According to Gallup's 2023 survey, 62% of population of Pakistan believes that the country is headed in wrong direction. The youth, which constitute of 64% of population, increasingly believes that politics is just a game of elites rather than vehicle for change. When public will be disillusioned, there will be decline in voter turnout, leading to less public engagement. Thus, this results into damaging democracy.

The polarized politics also causes economic instability. Political crises deter foreign investments, policy continuity and increase fiscal instability. For instance, the political turmoil of 2022 coincided with the record depreciation of rupee, delaying IMF bailout packages and worsen inflation. According to State Bank of Pakistan, GDP growth has fallen to 0.3%, mainly due to political uncertainty. This deters foreign investors, diplomats, and even international organizations to work with Pakistan. Thus, polarization translates into economic stagnation, deepening poverty and instability.

The Polarized Politics is also threat to National Security. Internal Division of a country makes it incapable to face external challenges. In 1971, due to internal divisions of East and West Pakistan, India was provided with the opportunity to exploit. Also, in recent years, political infighting has distracted the governments from addressing terrorism, cyber crime, and regional challenges. The National Security Policy of AOA, emphasized on cohesion for security and polarization continues to target this cohesion. Thus, this translates into further crisis to the national security.

Polarization also undermines the electoral processes. Almost every election in Pakistan is being accused of rigging. The elections of 1977 translates into General Zia's coup is landmark example in this scenario. Also, General Elections in recent years often turn into protests, rigging and boycotts. Such crises weaken democratic processes, as losing party view the system as biased. Thus, without credible election, democracy remains vulnerable to instability. In order to address this problem, political consensus is very important.

The polarization in politics also damages Pakistan's global standing. The international indices often rank Pakistan in politically unstable countries.

In Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic Index 2021, Pakistan was classified as "hybrid regime", ranked 107th out of 167 countries.

In Transparency International corruption's perception index, Pakistan ranked at 133rd out of 188 nations in 2023, a reflection of a weak governance. Thus, this deters investors to invest in

Pakistan, weakening economy as persistent polarization shows Pakistan an unreliable partner.

The advance democracies also face challenges due to polarization. For instance, in United States, there was repeated governments shut downs because of partisan. But, in times of crisis like Covid-19, the resilient institutions of US make sure of bipartisan.

In the same way, Pakistan can also learn that disagreements are inevitable but consensus building measures are necessary for the strong democracy.

In India, there is rise of Hindu Nationalist Party which marginalize the minorities. In the same way, Pakistan can learn that it can cause severe damage if polarization is left unchecked.

The solution lies in institutional reforms and political consensus between parties. Firstly, political parties should revise the Charter of Democracy, pledging to respect the electoral outcomes and parliamentary supremacy. Secondly, the election commission of Pakistan should be empowered enough to ensure transparency. Thirdly, media regulation is also very important for responsible journalism. Lastly, civic education and youth inclusion are essential to promote tolerance. Moreover, only through consensus building in Pakistan can escape the cycle of the polarization.

Polarized politics consistently undermined Pakistan's democratic

evolution. From the tragedy of 1971 to recent years 2020-23, political division translated into governance paralysis, weak institutions and legitimacy crisis. The Democracy thrives on debate and it collapses when debate turns into division. Pakistan must learn from its history and global experiences that excessive polarization is lethal for fragile economy. Only when Pakistan will shift from politics of polarization to politics of participation, its democracy will realize its true promise.