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Polarized Politics: The Issues and Challenges of Democracy in Pakistan

a- Introduction

b- Manifestations of Polarized Politics in Pakistan

1- Politics Framed in Rigid

Binaries

i- Patriots vs. Anti-State

(Fatima Jinnah, Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan)

2- Cycle of Political Vendetta and Institutional Abuse

i- Former victims seeking revenge

(Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan)

c- Issues and Challenges of Polarized Politics for Democracy in Pakistan

1- Rejection of Electoral Results.

(2018 and 2024 elections)

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2- Breakdown of Parliamentary Functioning

i- Walkout and Boycotts Reducing Legislative Engagement

(PPP staging walkouts in 2025)

3- Economic Fallout of Political Polarization Eroding Democratic Credibility

i- Lack of FDI due to instability (Telecom, Pfizer, Microsoft discontinuing operations)

4- Opening space for undemocratic interventions

(The 1958 and 1977 Martial laws)

5- Disruption of Federal Harmony

(MP not cooperating for counter terrorism operations)

6- Societal Fragmentation and Intolerance

i- use of derogatory terms for rival supporters (Tiyaley, Patwari, Youtias)

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7- Media Polarization and solutions
warfare undermining informed
voting (Geo and ARV aligned with
opposing political camps)

8- Regime changes and Policy
Discontinuity (PTI's Tariffs and
currency debt reforms partially re-
versed)

d-way forward: Mitigating Polarized Politics

1- Making Parliament the Real
Decision-Making Authority

i- Approval of major decisions in
Parliament not by one party

ii- Penalize walkouts

2- Strengthening Electoral and
Accountability Institutions

i- Appointing ECP and NAB members
through bipartisan committees

ii- Making ECP and NAB budgets
charged Expenditures on Federal
consolidated funds

e-Conclusion

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Polarized politics refers to the condition where political parties are sharply divided into opposing camps. This has been a long-standing issue in Pakistan. Politics in the country is framed in rigid binaries where one party is labeled patriot and the other anti-state, and a cycle of political vendette is also prevalent in Pakistan. Such divisive politics poses a serious threat to democracy in Pakistan. It culminates in rejection of electoral results, breakdown of parliamentary functioning, frequent regime changes, emboldenment of undemocratic institutions, and fragmentation of society. This adversarial politics can be mitigated by making parliament the real decision maker and by strengthening electoral and accountability bodies. In short, polarized politics is a perennial problem of Pakistan.

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which threatens democracy in the country, and it can be mitigated only by taking meaningful measures.

Politics in Pakistan is a competition of treachery versus patriotism. From declaring Fatima Jinnah a traitor and Indian agent in 1960s, to calling Nawaz Sharif "Noori tea party" in 2016, to labelling Imran Khan a national security threat in 2025, political rivalries have repeatedly been branded as anti-state in Pakistan. This shifts politics from policy disagreements to moral warfare where compromise is seen unacceptable. Consequently, political dialogues and parliamentary procedures breakdown. Moreover, political engagement is replaced by street politics and zero-sum tactics, such as walkouts and boycotts. Thus by framing political

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in rigid binaries, space for negotiations shrinks, and the country is locked in a state of polarization.

Another manifestation of polarized politics is the recurring pattern of political revenge and institutional abuse. The political transitions of Iran, Khan and Nawaz Sharif provide a clear example. In Iran, Khan's government from 2018 to 2022, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) aggressively persecuted Nawaz Sharif and eventually arrested him. In 2023, when Nawaz Sharif's party assumed power, the judiciary convicted and sentenced Iran Khan along with other leaders. Moreover, the charges against Nawaz Sharif were overturned. The court convictions also led to the disqualification of

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The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) opposition leaders, including Omar Ayub and Suhail Faraz. Such recurrent cycle of political vendettas deepen resentment among parties and reinforces polarization.

This polarized landscape creates numerous challenges and issues for democracy in Pakistan.

Defeat in elections is frequently rejected and victory is often disputed. Effective democratic government depends on peaceful transition of power and public trust in state institutions. However, due to polarized politics in Pakistan, almost every election is followed by raging allegations. In the 2018 elections, major opposition parties—including the

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Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) - accused PTI of gaining advantage due to administrative bias and flawed result transmission. The 2024 elections also faced claims of delayed results and mismatches between polling forms (Form-46) and final tallies (Form-47). After such rejections, opposition parties launch countrywide protests, which cripple the government and create political instability. In short, there is crisis of electoral credibility due to polarized politics, endangering democratic norms.

Parliamentary functioning is also obstructed owing to the adversarial politics. Proper legislative functioning is essential as elected representatives in the parliament make policies for

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Societal needs. Moreover, the Parliament resolves conflicts institutionally, reducing street politics. Pakistani political elites fail to realize this, and they have made walkouts and boycotts of parliamentary procedures a norm. For instance, a significant rift occurred between PPP and PML-N in 2025 over the Punjab chief minister's remarks on flood relief mechanism. Consequently, the PPP lawmakers staged high-profile walkouts from both the senate and the National Assembly. These parliamentary obstructions disrupt quorum, delay legislation, and weaken executive oversight, thereby weakening democracy.