

Democratic Unrest in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

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THE ESSAY

'Pakistan's democracy has been in nazuk mor (critical juncture) since Independence' said Maleeha Lodhi. Her use of word 'nazuk mor' indicates how much democracy has evolved over 7 decades in Pakistan. Geopolitical, internal and external dimensions have shaped the status of democracy in Pakistan. This multifaceted challenge has not only made it hard for the country to navigate through but has also given rise to democratic unrest. Pakistani policymakers and those at the realm of decision-making had to ensure that democracy status quo remained intact while dealing with the rising issues. Resistance or unwillingness to changing internal, external and global patterns have led to democratic unrest in the country. Under such circumstances the essay would delve into the causes and consequences of democratic unrest in Pakistan. For causes, the essay will examine the role of non political actors in political realm, political polarization, Abysmal performance indicators ^{of} government, passage of

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Controversial constitutional amendments, Rise of extremist political parties and the rise of non-state ^{violent} actors. The consequences of which include uncertainty over democratic procedures being followed, unwillingness to engage in dialogue, Poor development of social sectors, Taking law into hands since Judicial independence is no more there, growth of societal intolerance and violence, Human Rights violations. The Essay would provide way forward to address these issues subsequently.

Pakistan's democracy has had to bear the brunt of martial laws. For almost half of its history, Pakistan has remained under a military dictator. Due to such reasons, democracy, democratic norms and values have been matured and developed fully. It was only till 2008 that we saw the first democratic government complete its term in 2013. A remarkable achievement for the country. The pattern followed as 2013 ~~and~~ government completed its term in 2018. However, the next government was not able to complete

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its term. Democratic unrest which was already there since Benazir Bhutto's assassination peaked in 2002 and in the subsequent events. Much of what is happening now resembles what was there during the first few decades after Pakistan's independence, with a slight change in the medium and mechanism in communications and control. The constant democratic unrest has been a key feature of Pakistan's state of democracy and it shapes how state and non-state actors interact in the democratic realm.

To begin with, the interference of non-political actors has been a key feature of democratic unrest in Pakistan. They have meddled in key political decision-making processes, shrinking the spaces for democratic forces and alienating or sidelining the voices of those elected officials. A key example can be of Kargil incident where then-Army Chief Pervez Musharraf took a unilateral decision to go into the Indian-administered

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territory and occupy. The fact that the civilian leadership was kept highlights how the ~~senior~~ democratically elected prime minister was sidelined. This led to mistrust among Govt and the Establishment paving way for a military coup in later time. Democracy was derailed and resentment and frustration was there prevalent in the democratic spaces.

Similarly, political polarization has fuelled democratic unrest in Pakistan. The rise of PTI in KPK, PPP in Sindh and PMN in Punjab, each with their own point of view have shrunk the space for a meaningful dialogue. Their workers do not either pay heed to what others' ^{matter} point of view is on a certain. Such events highlight that society becomes divided into small pockets, within which loyalty to party or the group is more crucial or greater than making a rationale-driven decision. An Analogy can be drawn of a Tug of war where each side fights for its

win. The difference only is that in Tug of War, one may come out as ~~the~~ winner, but in such ^{divided} society there are no winners and only losers.

Furthermore, The poor performance by all 3 levels of government have contributed to worsening of democracy in Pakistan and the democratic unrest that accompanies it. Aysmal performance breeds mistrust, lack of cooperation and hopelessness in society. Federal govt. Despite the passage of 18th Amendment in 2010, the poor local governance has contributed to helplessness in society. The framework remains there and the roadmap presents how development will go about but the lack of political will by Federal, provincial and local governments have put some through the question of 'What next now' and some to resort to unlawful / illegal means to survive. The governments serve as the engine of the vehicle. They remaining standstill will lead to nowhere.

The passage of controversial constitutional amendments in a haste manner has led to democratic unrest in Pakistan. Civil society, Bar councils, lawyers forums and independent think tanks have raised concerns over how such amendment could be disastrous for the state of democracy in the ~~world~~ Pakistan. Protests in streets and main junctions across Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi has not only led to mass awareness about the controversial constitutional amendments through social media but has also contributed towards state action against those who are protesting on the ground.

There has also been a rise of extremist political parties like Tehreek e Labaik Pakistan in democratic spaces of the country. They have disseminated their narrow point of views ~~through~~ aired on news channels and social media, to attract attention and audience. It has led towards democratic unrest as population is made to believe on everything the leader

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iterates. Their perception serves as a threat to overall society as not every faction of society subscribes to the grim point of view promoted by TLP figures and other such groups. The more it makes the society accept itself as is, the more likely that socially excluded or frustrated individuals may join it to find a sense of purpose, identity and perhaps a living. The group may use them to achieve their own extremist political goals.

There has also been a surge in non-state actors with violent objectives. State has resorted to a hard-line approach to crush or suppress them. While the plan may appear to be right in its objective, crushing the group ~~for~~^{through} a hard-line approach may lead to collateral damage to societies or groups where such terrorist elements reside ~~in~~ in. It would lead to the civilians being frustrated by the system. Democratic unrest could take the shape of civilians

Joining hands with terrorist elements or becoming weary of state elements.

The consequences of Democratic unrest are also profound. Meddling into political affairs by non-political actors may lead to uncertainty ~~that~~ over whether the democratic process will move on like it has been outlined.

This could pave way for unrest as nobody would ^{know} ~~remain~~ that their democratic right would be properly protected or preserved. Similarly, it would lead to promotion of non-democratic norms such as horse-trading and threats to elected officials to vote or take a certain stance. Overall, it would rupture the democratic environment, create tensions among members in the democratic spaces.

Democracy is the name of rule of law, whereby law clearly outlines what is to be done, how is it to be done and when it should be done. Any uncertainty would breed mistrust and chaos in the system.

Moreover, Unwillingness to engage in

dialogue with other parties to resolve critical issues may also be one of the consequence of democratic unrest in Pakistan. Every party has differences in regards to their point of view but unwillingness to keep them aside and work for a common goal or to resolve a critical issue may breed instability in the system as public would get disappointed. Street demonstrations and protest may become a usual thing. Overtime a momentum could reach its peak that would not only threaten the entire democratic space but also invite non political actors to jump in to 'save' Pakistan from chaos and lack of political will by political actors. political polarization would destroy the democratic foundations of the state and instill democratic unrest in the society.

Similarly, Democratic unrest would also lead towards poor development of social sectors, low standards of living and high inflation. This would serve as a base for democratic

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Unrest because absence of basic facilities would ~~be~~ invite resentment and frustration in the people. It would also allow for different political parties to play along the ~~pop~~ populist agenda to win their way to power. Social sectors such as education, health, infrastructure are also the backbone of society's pathway to progress. Depriving such facilities could set the stage for mass level agitations, violence and revolt that is supported by the society. The state would find it hard to fight against its own people.

There is a fear of Taking law into ^{their} hands due to the least resort of hope and justice being curtailed. The passage of 26th and 27th constitutional amendments has made the judiciary, in a way, subservient to executive. This implies that handpicked judges would be selected for the post. Justice in sight would not be there as decisions taken by govt would ~~be~~ not be dismissed.

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by country's top court. Similarly, no individual would feel safe or protected by law if he goes against someone who is powerful or has strong connections in the government. ~~Such~~ Such environment would breed mistrust, hopelessness and resorting to violence would be the last option, if injustice becomes prevalent. Democratic unrest would not be a distant reality then.

Furthermore, growth of extremist elements may give rise to environment of intolerance towards those who do not confine to conventional or majoritarian point of view. This could pave way for violence and tensions in society. Minorities, specially Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians, would feel threatened by such actions. There may appear levels of violent tendencies among such minority groups too for the lack of govt action and unwillingness of the extremist group would provide minorities no option but to respond them back, despite them being in a losing side. This would further complicate stability and breed Democratic unrest in the country.