

Democratic Unrest in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

Outline

1- Introduction:

- When the pillars of democracy weaken, power struggles replace dialogue, and governance loses its purpose.
- Democratic unrest has repeatedly challenged Pakistan's political landscape, testing the resilience of its institutions and governance structures.
- Thesis statement: Thus, democratic unrest in Pakistan arises from weak institutions, civil-military imbalances, governance failure, political polarization, socioeconomic inequalities, media disinformation, and limited education. It results in economic hardships, rising protests and security threats, declining public trust, non-democratic influence, erosion of civil rights, and weakened

foreign policy.

2. Causes of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

i) Fragile Democratic Institutions

Fragile Democratic Institutions, weakened by inefficiency and lack of independence, foster political instability and erode public trust, driving unrest.

ii) Civil-Military Power Imbalances

Civil-military power imbalance, marked by repeated interventions, undermines civilian authority, disrupts governance, and perpetuates political instability.

iii) Governance Failure And Corruptions

Governance Failure and Corruption undermines public trust, hinders transparency, and intensify democratic instability.

iv) Deepening Political Polarizations

Deepening political polarization fosters hostility, blocks consensus and negotiations, and weaken democratic processes.

v) Expanding Socio-Economic Inequalities

Escalating socio-economic inequalities fuel

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and contribute to recurring democratic unrest.

vi) Growth of Media Disinformation:

The growth of media disinformation spreads false narratives, fuels societal polarization, and intensifies democratic unrest.

vii) Limited Educational Developments:

Illiteracy reduces civic awareness and leadership capacity, undermining informed decision-making and fueling democratic unrest.

3. Consequences of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

i) Widening Economic Hardships Persists

Democratic unrest disrupts markets, slows growth, and increases unemployment and inflation, worsening economic hardships.

ii) Rising Public Protests:

Democratic unrest provokes frequent protests and strikes, escalating social instability and public dissatisfaction.

iii) Increasing Internal Security Threats:

This weakens governance, enabling militant activity and escalating internal security

threats nationwide.

iv) Declining Public Institutional Trust:

This unrest erodes public trust in key institutions, weakening governance and perpetuating political instability.

v) Growing Non-Democratic Influence:

Democratic unrest empowers non-democratic actors, weakening civilian oversight and entrenching parallel power structures.

vi) Erosion of Civil Rights

Democratic unrest undermines civil liberties, restricting free expression, assembly, and political participation.

vii) Weakening Foreign Policy

Democratic unrest disrupts governance, weakening foreign policy consistency, international credibility, and foreign investment.

4. Way Forward:

Strengthening institutions, promoting accountability, enhancing civic awareness, and reducing polarization can restore democratic stability and public trust in Pakistan.

5. Conclusion:

Essay

When the pillars of democracy weaken, power struggles replace dialogue, and governance loses its purpose. Political instability spreads like wildfire, touching every corner of society. In such an environment, even ordinary citizens feel the weight of a system on the brink of collapse. Democratic unrest has repeatedly challenged Pakistan's political landscape, testing the resilience of its institutions and governance structures. Periods of instability create uncertainty and hinder the smooth functioning of the state. Citizens are left navigating a system where political continuity and public confidence remain fragile. Thus, democratic unrest in Pakistan arises from weak institutions, civil military imbalances, governance failures, political polarization, socioeconomic inequalities, media disinformation, and limited education. It results in economic hardships, rising protests, security

threats, declining public trust, non-democratic influence, erosion of civil rights, and weakened foreign policy.

First of all, fragile democratic institutions are a primary cause of democratic unrest in Pakistan. These institutions often lack independence and face structural inefficiencies that prevent timely delivery of justice, transparent elections, and effective accountability. Their weakness allows political disputes to escalate outside proper institutional channels, fueling instability and public frustration. In August 2025, a two-judge bench comprising Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah and Justice Ayesha A. Malik explicitly cautioned that "delays in adjudicating cases at any level of the justice system erode public confidence, undermine the rule of law, and disproportionately harm the weak and vulnerable who cannot afford prolonged litigation", noting that more than 2.2 million cases were pending across Pakistan's courts. Therefore, weak and inefficient democratic institutions directly contribute

to recurring cycles of unrest and undermine the legitimacy of governance.

Furthermore, repeated military interventions have disrupted the balance of power between civilian governments and the armed forces, fueling democratic unrest in Pakistan. Frequent interventions and excessive military influence limit the authority of elected leaders, forcing compromises on key policies. Civilian governments struggle to implement reforms or maintain continuity. This persistent imbalance creates political uncertainty and weakens democratic governance. For instance, Pakistan has experienced several military coups in 1958, 1977, and 1999, each of which led to the dismissal of elected governments and stalled democratic consolidation. These interventions not only disrupted political continuity but also weakened public trust in civilian institutions and democratic processes. Thus, the dominance of military over civilian authority undermines democracy and perpetuates cycles of political instability.

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Similarly, Governance failures and corruption have significantly contributed to democratic unrest in Pakistan. Inefficient service delivery, lack of transparency, and misuse of public resources undermine citizens' trust in the government. Leaders often prioritize personal or party interest over public welfare, leaving essential needs unmet. This gap between expectations and performance fuels frustration and weakens democratic legitimacy. According to the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International, Pakistan ranks 135th out of 180 countries, placing it among the more corrupt nations globally and highlighting widespread misuse of power that fuels public disillusionment with democratic government. Consequently, governance failure and corruption erode confidence in democratic institutions and intensify political instability. Additionally, deepening political polarization has intensified democratic unrest in Pakistan. Rival political parties often adopt extreme

positions, framing opponents as existential threats rather than partners in governance. This hostility hinders dialogue, prevents consensus on important policies, and stalls legislative processes. The resulting divisions extend into society, increasing tension and instability. For example, a recent study titled "Political Polarization in Pakistan: Implications for Governance and Social Cohesion" finds that growing polarization has undermined institutional trust, disrupted governance, and made democratic processes almost dysfunctional. Hence, growing political polarization undermines cooperation, escalates conflict, and more importantly weakens the democratic process.

Likewise, widening socio-economic gaps have intensified public discontent and democratic unrest. Rising poverty, unemployment, and uneven wealth distribution create widespread public dissatisfaction. Marginalized groups often feel excluded from political and economic opportunities, reducing their trust in

the system. This gap between rich and poor heightens social tension and increases susceptibility to unrest. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2024 report, nearly 25.3% of the population is below the poverty line, and income disparities continue to widen, reflecting deep structural inequalities that undermine social cohesion. Moreover, socio-economic disparities not only exacerbate public frustration but also contribute to recurring cycles of political instability and unrest.

Moreover, the growth of media disinformation also play a crucial role in intensifying the democratic unrest in Pakistan. Unchecked news outlets and social media platforms often spread misleading or biased information, inflaming public opinion. Citizens may form distorted perceptions about political events or government actions, increasing mistrust and division. This misinformation undermines informed

report by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) titled "Platforms at the Polls" analyzing 255 social-media posts between November 2023 and March 2024 found that 163 of them (~72%) qualified as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, or hate content, many targeting politicians, journalists, and marginalized groups. Accordingly, the proliferation of media disinformation weakens public trust, escalates conflicts, and fuels ongoing democratic unrest.

Last but not least, limited educational development has fueled democratic unrest in Pakistan by weakening both citizen engagement and leadership capacity. Low literacy rates and limited access to quality education reduce civic awareness and critical thinking among the public, leaving them more vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation. Simultaneously, poorly educated leaders often lack the knowledge and skills to formulate effective policies and manage governance efficiently. This combination of

uninformed citizens and under-prepared leadership deepens political instability and societal divisions. According to the 2024-25 Economic Survey of Pakistan, the national literacy rate stands at only 60.6%, while around 38% of school-age children remain out of school, highlighting the education deficits that weaken both civic awareness and leadership capacity. Therefore, inadequate educational development undermines informed decision-making at all levels, exacerbating political unrest and weakening democratic governance of country.

The persistent weakness in institutions, governance, leadership, and public awareness have created fertile ground for unrest. These underlying issues inevitably manifest in economic strain, social protests, security challenges, and declining trust in democratic processes.

Firstly, democratic unrest in Pakistan has led to widening economic hardship across

Society. Political instability disrupts markets, slows development projects, and reduces investor confidence. Frequent protests and governance uncertainties create an unpredictable business environment, affecting both domestic and foreign enterprise. Ordinary citizens face rising unemployment, inflation, and reduced access to essential services. The World Bank reported that Pakistan's GDP growth slowed to 2.5% in 2024 due in part to political uncertainty and policy inconsistency, highlighting the direct economic impact of democratic unrest. Overall, democratic instability not only hampers national economic growth but also exacerbates the financial hardships of ordinary citizens.

Additionally, democratic unrest has fueled rising public protests and social instability in Pakistan. Frequent political crises, governance failure, and socio-economic inequalities drive citizens to express frustration through protests and strikes. These protests often disrupt daily

life, hinder business activities, and create tensions between the public and authorities.

Social divisions deepen as polarized groups clash, escalating unrest across cities and rural areas alike. For example, in 2024, Pakistan witnessed multiple nationwide protest over political disputes and economic hardships, including large-scale strikes in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, highlighting the link between democratic instability and public unrest. As a result, democratic unrest directly contributes to heightened social unrest by increasing protests and strikes, and persistent public dissatisfaction.

Moreover, democratic unrest has contributed to a sharp rise in internal security threats across Pakistan. Political instability weakens institutional oversight and creates openings for militant and extremist groups to exploit governance gaps. Uncertain law and order lowers the threshold for violence, especially in already-violent regions. As a

result, attacks and civilian casualties rise, undermining public safety and state stability. According to the Pakistan Security Report 2024 by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PTPS), terrorist attacks surged by 70% from the previous year, with 521 incidents recorded, highlighting a significant rise in insecurity nationwide. In brief, democratic instability not only disrupts governance but also heightens internal security risks, threatening both public safety and social order.

Notably, democratic unrest has significantly eroded public confidence in core state institutions. Frequent political crises, governance failure, and corruption create widespread perceptions of ineffectiveness among government bodies. Citizens grow skeptical of institutions like the police, judiciary, and contracting agencies, reducing cooperation and engagement. This erosion of trust undermines democratic legitimacy and fuels

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further instability. Transparency International Pakistan's 2023 National Corruption Perception Survey (NCPS 2023) found that the police were perceived as the most corrupt sector (30%), followed by Tendering and Contracting (16%) and the judiciary (13%), reflecting deep public distrust in core institutions. Hence, declining institutional trust weakens governance, diminishes public cooperation, and perpetuates cycles of political unrest.

Similarly, democratic unrest has enabled the expansion of non-democratic influence in Pakistan's politics. Political instability and weak civilian institutions create openings for the military and other non-democratic actors to exert significant control. Their involvement extends beyond formal governance into economic and policy domains, allowing them to shape decisions behind the scenes. This parallel power structure undermines civilian supremacy and the democratic process.

According to a 2023 analysis, the military controls

a vast network of commercial foundations and businesses, including Fauji Foundation, Army Welfare Trust, Shaheen Foundation, and Bahria Foundation, which operate largely outside civilian oversight and enjoy tax-exempt status. This economic autonomy enables the military to maintain substantial influence over state affairs even without formal governance roles. However, democratic instability strengthens non-democratic actors' reach, weakening civilian oversight and entrenching a parallel power structure that threatens the integrity of Pakistan's democracy.

Furthermore, democratic unrest has contributed to a gradual erosion of civil rights in Pakistan. Frequent political crises and authoritarian tendencies restrict freedoms of speech, assembly, and press, as governments and security agencies attempt to maintain control. Protests are often met with excessive force, and dissenting voices face intimidation or legal actions. These actions limit citizen's ability to participate freely in democratic

processes. The 2024 Freedom House report ranked Pakistan as "Partly Free", assigning it a score of 32 out of 100 for political rights and civil liberties, highlighting increased restrictions on press freedom, arbitrary arrest of activists, and limits on public assembly amid political instability. Ultimately, ^{ongoing} democratic unrest undermined ~~the~~ civilian liberties, curtails political expression, and weakens the foundations of participatory governance.

Last but not least, democratic unrest has weakened Pakistan's foreign policy effectiveness and international credibility. Disruptions in democratic governance and civil-military tensions hinder consistent policy formulation and engagement with global partners. As a result, Pakistan struggles to uphold long-term commitments and maintain strategic relationships. This also discourages foreign investment, reflecting diminished confidence in the country's governance and stability.

According to the State Bank of Pakistan, net

foreign direct investment (FDI) dropped sharply by 26% during the first four months of fiscal 2025-26, falling to US \$ 747.7 million from US \$ 1.01 billion in the same period the previous year, indicating reduced investor confidence amid ongoing democratic unrest. Thus, persistent democratic unrest undermines foreign policy's consistency, weakens international trust, and restricts foreign investments, further limiting Pakistan's global influence.

To address democratic unrest, Pakistan must prioritize strengthening its democratic institutions and ensuring civilian supremacy in governance. Transparent and accountable political processes are needed to rebuild confidence in the system. Reforms to curb corruption and promote equitable socio-economic development can further restore public trust. Investment in civic education, media literacy, and legal awareness will help citizens engage responsibly in democratic practices. Strong cooperation between the government, civil society, and independent institutions is necessary

to uphold civil liberties and reduce polarization.

These combined efforts can build a resilient democratic system capable of sustaining political stability and supporting the national development.

In a nut shell, democratic unrest in Pakistan is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and addressing it will require a comprehensive and integrated approach. This issue emerges from long-standing weaknesses that limit the ability of country to move towards stable and accountable governance. Weak institutions, civil-military imbalances, corruption, political polarization, socio-economic inequalities, media disinformation, and limited education collectively fuel instability and unrest. That results in economic strain, social unrest, security threats, declining institutional trust, erosion of civil rights and weaken foreign policy. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms that strengthen democratic frameworks, promote accountability,

and empower citizens through education and awareness. A sustainable path forward lies in institutional reforms, political maturity, and an informed citizenry that can hold power to account. When democratic norms are strengthened and leadership becomes responsible, the country can move from recurring unrest to a more stable and inclusive future.