

DEMOCRATIC UNREST IN PAKISTAN:

CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCES:

OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's democratic journey marked by repeated cycles of hope and breakdown; reference to Faiz Ahmad Faiz's verse about "dawn that never came", symbolizing political uncertainty.

II. CAUSES OF DEMOCRATIC UNREST

- 1- Colonial Legacy and Weak Institutional Framework.
- 2- Civil-Military Imbalance and Interrupted Democratic Continuity.
- 3- ~~Civil-Military~~ Fragile Political Parties and Leadership Crisis.
- 4- Governance Failures, Corruption, and Economic stress.

5- Judicial Activism and Constitutional Confrontations.

6- Media Polarization and Rise of Digital Agitation.

7- External Pressures and Geopolitical Vulnerabilities.

III - CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOCRATIC UNREST:

1- Chronic Political Instability and Weak Governance.

2- Economic slowdown and Investor Uncertainty.

3- Erosion of Public Trust in Democratic Institutions.

4- Rise of Populism and Street Politics.

5- Weakening of Rule of Law and Constitutional Authority.

6- Diplomatic Costs and International Reputation Damage.

7- Social Division and National Cohesion Breakdown.

IV CONCLUSION

Democracy in Pakistan has often resembled what Faiz Ahmad Faiz once called "Subah-e-be-noor"—a dawn without day light, a system that promises stability but frequently sinks into turmoil. From its earliest years, the country inherited a fragile political structure and powerful bureaucrat-military apparatus, a pattern analysed by Ayesha Jalal in "The State of Martial Rule". Over the decades, economic stress, leadership Crisis, judicial intervention, and external pressure have repeatedly shaken the democratic order, creating cycles of unrest that echo through Pakistan's history. The consequences of this instability are profound: weakening institutions, deepening public mistrust, damaging economic prospects and fragmenting social cohesion. To understand Pakistan's democratic predicament, it's essential to examine the multiple causes behind this unrest and the far-reaching consequences that continue to shape its political landscape today.

At Independence, Pakistan inherited a strong colonial bureaucracy and a weak political class.

Instead of building representative institutions, early governments depended on civil servants and military officers for administration.

Ayesha Jalal in "The State of Martial Rule" explains that this structural imbalance became the foundation for future instability.

Therefore, a young state without experienced political institutions naturally struggled to uphold democracy, resulting in unrest.

Additionally, military interventions in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999 disrupted democratic evolution. Each coup dissolved parliament, weakened political parties, and strengthened non-elected centres of power. Hussain Haqqani's "Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military" argues that these repeated disruptions created a hybrid system where democracy could never mature. This imbalance remains one of the major causes of democratic unrest in Pakistan.

Furthermore, most political parties in Pakistan revolve around families or personalities rather than democratic structures. Internal factors or elections are rare, and decision-making is centralized. In the 1990s, frequent government dismissals showed how weak party discipline and leadership crises destabilized democracy. Without strong parties, democratic culture cannot survive, contributing to directly to democratic unrest in Pakistan.

Moreover, rising inflation, poor service delivery create public frustration and public dissatisfaction. High inflation, unemployment, corruption, and unequal development weaken public trust in democratic institutions. Imran Hussain's "Governing/Governing the Ungovernable" highlights how Pakistan's state machinery struggle to deliver essential services due to outdated administrative systems and political interference. When people feel that government cannot manage the economy or improve their living conditions, frustration spills onto the streets.

in the form of protests, agitation, and anti-government movements. Thus, economic hardships feed directly into democratic instability.

In the same vein Judicial interventions in political matters have frequently contributed to democratic unrest. Pakistan's judiciary has, at various points, played an active role in dissolving assemblies, disqualifying political leaders, and interpreting constitutional provisions in ways that reshape politics. Historically the courts validated military takeovers with the Doctrine of Necessity, weakening constitutional supremacy. In recent years, high-profile cases and judicial-executive confrontations have created uncertainty around elections and government's authority.

When courts become battleground for political disputes, it fuels instability and undermines the democratic process.

Not only this but the Media landscape in Pakistan has become increasingly polarized, with channels adopting political biases that shape public perceptions. Talk shows often

promote sensationalism rather than constructive dialogue, creating confusion and emotional divisions among citizens. Social media adds another layer of unrest through misinformation, political trolling, and digital warfare. According to Marshall McLuhan's idea of the "global village", information now circulates at unprecedented speed, but in Pakistan's case, this speed simplifies/amplifies polarization and makes democratic conflict more volatile. Media-driven narratives often escalate tensions instead of promoting stability, which leads to pro-democratic unrest in Pakistan.

Besides this Pakistan's democracy is influenced by external factors and geopolitical realities. Dependence on international loans, particularly from the IMF, restricts domestic policy autonomy. Regional tensions with India, the war in Afghanistan, and global power politics have further shaped internal decision making. Such ~~entire~~ external factors weaken democratic

consolidation by forcing governments to make unpopular decisions, often leading to unrest and public distrust.

The Consequences of Democratic Unrest leading to Chronic political instability and weak governance. Democratic unrest produces a cycle of unstable governments, fragile coalitions, and frequent changes in leadership. Cabinets are reshuffled, ministers lack continuity, and long-term policy planning becomes impossible. This instability weakens the state's ability to address national problems effectively. When government authority is repeatedly challenged, institutions become defensive rather than proactive. The result is a governance model that reacts to crises instead of preventing them, deepening the cycle of unrest.

Similarly political instability directly impacts the economy. Investors hesitate to commit capital in a country where the government may fall or policies may change overnight. Every major political conflict - whether a protest, a long march, or a constitutional crisis - causes

stock market chop, currency depreciation, and declines in ~~reducing~~ foreign investment. The resulting economic slowdown increases unemployment, reduces growth, and creates more frustration among the public. Thus, economic decline is both a cause and a consequence of democratic unrest.

Furthermore, repeated instability erodes public confidence in the democratic process. Citizens begin to believe that democracy cannot deliver stability, justice, or prosperity. Declining voter turnout, political apathy, and rising anger reflect this growing distrust. When people lose faith in institutions such as parliaments, courts, and political parties, the democratic system weakens from within. This erosion of trust is one of the most serious consequences because it threatens the long-term survival of democratic culture.

Additionally, in times of unrest, political actors turn to populism and street agitation to show strength. Long marches, demonstrations, and mass rallies replace parliamentary debate and

compromise. The 2014 and 2022 protests demonstrate how quickly political power can shift from legislative chambers to public squares. While street politics can mobilize citizens, it also disrupts governance and undermines institutional mechanisms for resolving disputes. The rise of populism further destabilizes democracy by prioritizing emotional mobilization over rational policy-making.

Moreover, as political tensions rise, conflicts between the executive, judiciary, and legislative intensify. Constitutional provisions are frequently interpreted in contradictory ways, and laws are used selectively to target opponents. When state institutions challenge each other, the authority of constitution is weakened. This creates confusion about who holds legitimate power and encourages arbitrary decision-making. A weekend rule of law makes democratic stability even more difficult to achieve.

Likewise, Political unrest affects Pakistan's global standing. International Partners view instability as a sign of weak governance and

unreliable commitments. Negotiations with institutions like the IMF become harder because political uncertainty raises doubts about policy continuity. Foreign governments and investors become cautious, reducing Pakistan's diplomatic leverage. An unstable political government/environment thus harms the country not only at home but also on the global stage.

Not only this but democratic unrest deepens societal divisions - ethnic, sectarian, regional and ideological. Public debates turn into hostile confrontations, and communities begin to distrust one another. As others liever, in "Pakistan: A Hard Country," warns that social fragmentation threatens national unity. When political conflict fuels hatred, misinformation, and intolerance, the very fabric of society begins to tear. A divided nation struggles to build consensus, making democratic recovery harder.

"A democracy that trembles at every crisis is like a candle flickering in the wind." Democracy

crisis in Pakistan results from long-standing structural weaknesses, fragile political parties, governance failures, and elite-driven politics.

Its consequences - weak institutions, social polarization, eroded public trust, and economic stagnation - have repeatedly destabilized the state.

Yet history shows that countries can overcome such crises through constitutional adherence, institutional reforms, civic maturity. Pakistan can achieve democratic stability by strengthening the rule of law, reforming political institutions, fostering dialogue, and curbing civil-military interference. Democracy is a continuous process, and only sustained institutional and civic efforts can transform Pakistan's cycle of crisis into lasting stability.