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Essay

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Democratic Unrest in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

Outline

I- Introduction

- a) Overview of recurring democratic unrest in Pakistan
- b) Background information
- c) Thesis statement

II- Understanding Democratic Unrest

- a) Meaning and forms of democratic unrest.
- b) Pakistan-specific manifestations

III- Historical Roots of Democratic Instability

- a) Weak democratic foundations at independence
- b) Early constitutional crises and martial laws (1958, 1977, 1999)
- c) Patronage politics and repeated military interventions

IV- Major Causes of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

A- Institutional Imbalance

- a) Civil-military tensions;
executive-legislature-
judiciary conflicts.

B- Political Polarization and Zero-Sum Politics

- a) Confrontational politics;
use of democracy for
personal or party gains.

C- Weak Governance and Corruption

- a) Poor service delivery,
patronage systems, and
public disillusionment.

D- Judicial and Legislative Challenges

- a) Judicial activism, executive influence, and controversial appointments.
- b) Hasty amendments (such as the 27th Amendment);
lack of lawmaker scrutiny.

E- Electoral Mismanagement

- a) Disputed elections, weak ECP, and lack of internal party of democracy.

P- Socio-Economic Inequalities

- a) Poverty, unemployment, inflation, and youth frustration.

G- External Influence

- a) Geopolitical pressures; IMF-imposed policies; foreign interference.

✓- Contemporary Examples of Democratic Unrest

- a) Judicial-executive conflicts
- b) Protests, sit-ins, blockades, and politicized institutions.

~~c) Stagnation until next elections, 2024~~

VI- Consequences of Democratic Unrest in Pakistan

A- Political Consequences

- a) Weak parliament, instability, and legitimacy crisis.

B- Economic Consequences

- a) Investor uncertainty, policy disruption, and low growth.

C- Social Consequences

- a) Polarization, disformation, and

brain drain.

D - Security Consequences

- a) Exploitation by extremist groups; law and order breakdown.

E - Governance Consequences

- a) Bureaucratic politicization and administrative breakdown.

F - International Consequences

- a) Tarnished democratic image, reduced foreign investment, and external vulnerability.

VII - How Democratic Unrest Undermines the State

- a) Tripod of democracy (executive-legislature-judiciary) destabilized.
- b) weak rule of law, institutional erosion, and public distrust.

VIII - Pathways to Democratic Stability

- a) Strengthening institutions
- b) Electoral Reforms
- c) Judicial Reforms
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Essay

Pakistan's democratic journey has been marked by recurring cycles of instability, political upheaval, and institutional fragility. Since independence, the country has struggled to establish a stable democratic order capable of balancing the will of the people with the rule of law and effective governance. The gradual weakening of the judiciary, hasty constitutional amendments, and the politicization of state institutions have created a "democracy" standing on one leg, vulnerable to manipulation and dysfunction. Historical legacies, such as the adoption of Roman law traditions modified by English common law, ^{and} the foundation for Pakistan's judicial and administrative structures, yet contemporary

politics has eroded their ethical and institutional strength. Legislators passing the **27th Amendment** without scrutiny and the erosion of judicial integrity illustrate the structural weaknesses that continue to fuel unrest. Political polarization, socio-economic disparities, and external influences further exacerbate democratic instability, making the pursuit of stable, accountable and functional governance an ongoing challenge.

This essay argues that Pakistan's democratic unrest stems from institutional imbalance, governance failures, political rivalry, and socio-economic ~~disparities~~ inequities, producing profound consequences for political stability, social cohesion, and national progress.

Democratic unrest refers to persistent instability within a democratic system, often marked by political agitation, breakdown of consensus, mass protests, and constitutional crises. In **Pakistan**, this unrest takes distinctive forms, including recurring civil-military tensions, disputed elections, and frequent clashes between the judiciary and the executive. These conflicts, combined with governance

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paralysis, hinder effective policy-making and erode public confidence in democratic institutions. Such manifestations reflect both the structural weaknesses of the state and the challenges of sustaining democratic norms, creating a cycle of instability that undermines political, social, and economic development.

Pakistan's democratic instability has deep historical roots, beginning with the colonial legacy that left weak democratic institutions at independence.

The early leadership vacuum following the ~~death~~ deaths of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan further hindered the consolidation of democratic norms. The country faced multiple constitutional crises in the 1950s, culminating in the imposition of the first martial law in 1958. Recurrent cycles of military rule under Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf repeatedly disrupted institutional development and weakened civilian authority. Instead of nurturing a democratic culture, politics became entrenched in patronage networks, emphasizing personal loyalty and short-

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term gains over governance and public accountability. These historical patterns set the stage for persistent political fragility, laying the foundation for the recurring unrest observed in Pakistan's democratic system today.

Having examined the historical and institutional context, it is essential to analyze the key political, social, and economic factors that continue to fuel democratic unrest in Pakistan.

A significant cause of democratic unrest in Pakistan is the persistent imbalance between civilian governments and the military establishment. Power struggles often emerge when the military overreaches during political crises or engages in political engineering, undermining the authority of elected governments. Weak parliamentary oversight further exacerbates the problem, leaving civilian institutions unable to assert control or maintain accountability. As the Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi once defined democracy, it is a tripod of "the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary."

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Pakistan's repeated disruptions demonstrate how the fragility of one leg of this tripod destabilizes the entire democratic system, perpetuating cycles of institutional conflict and political instability.

Political polarization in Pakistan has transformed democratic competition into a contest of personal and party rivalries, often prioritizing short-term gains over the national interest. The personalization of politics, along with a culture of street protests, long marches, and aggressive tactics, has made it harder for people to agree on things and work in institutions.

Disinformation, digital echo chambers, and media sensationalism further deepen divisions, shaping public opinion along partisan lines. As the late Benazir Bhutto once asserted,

"Democracy is the best revenge", reflecting how democratic processes are frequently distorted into tools for settling political scores rather than serving the people. This zero-sum approach erodes democratic norms, fuels instability, and perpetuates cycles of unrest, as governance

becomes increasingly reactive to partisan pressures rather than proactive for national development.

Weak governance and corruption have long contributed to democratic unrest in Pakistan. Mismanagement, poor service delivery, and the misuse of public resources have left citizens frustrated and disillusioned with the state. Patronage networks, which allocate positions and benefits based on personal connections instead of merit, have undermined institutions and diminished public trust. Because of this culture of favoritism and inefficiency, governments have not been able to meet the country's most pressing needs. As a result, citizens lose confidence in elected leadership, seeing them as serving personal or partisan interests rather than the national good. Over time, this erosion of trust fuels instability and reinforces the cycles of democratic unrest that have persisted throughout Pakistan's history.

Judicial and legislative actions in Pakistan have increasingly influenced political outcomes, often undermining public trust and

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destabilizing democracy. Court interventions and controversial rulings, frequent shifts in the balance of power, while hastily passed or poorly reviewed constitutional amendments weaken essential checks and balances. The 22nd

Amendment, enacted without thorough debate, granted lifelong immunity to certain state functionaries, providing a temporary or pyrrhic victory that leaves the democratic system vulnerable to future crises. ✱

Alexander Hamilton, the American Founding Father, cautioned that

"Liberty can have nothing to fear from the judiciary alone, but would have everything to fear from its union with either of the other departments." This warning highlights

the danger when the judiciary and legislature align to serve political interests rather than the public good.

Such politicization and poorly conceived amendments directly contribute to instability, eroding the rule of law and public confidence in democratic institutions.

Electoral mismanagement has been a recurring factor in Pakistan's democratic unrest. Disputed elections, including those

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in 1977, 2013, 2018, and 2024, have fueled political tensions and public skepticism. Allegations of pre- and post-poll rigging have undermined confidence in the **Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)** and the electoral process as a whole. Weak internal party structures and the absence of genuine internal democracy further exacerbate the problem, leaving voters with limited trust in political parties and their ability to represent public interests. These deficiencies in electoral management contribute to political instability and erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Socio-economic inequalities have significantly contributed to democratic unrest in Pakistan. High unemployment, rising inflation, widespread poverty, and limited social mobility have created widespread public frustration. This discontent often translates into anti-government sentiment, intensifying political tensions. The country's large youth population adds further volatility to the political landscape. The latest Labor Force Survey shows that the total youth population is close to 62.58 million,

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representing 26% of the total population. Facing limited educational and employment opportunities, this growing segment can intensify socio-political pressures. These economic and social challenges fuel public dissatisfaction and weaken the foundations of democratic stability, making it harder for governments to maintain legitimacy and effective governance.

External influence has significantly affected Pakistan's democratic stability. Geopolitical pressures from global powers often shape domestic political decisions and constrain policy autonomy. Foreign funding of political actors or narratives can skew political competition, undermining genuine public representation. Economic dependence on the IMF further complicates governance. Since 2024, Pakistan has been under a 37-month Extended Fund Facility worth approximately US\$7 billion, with an initial ~~disburse~~ disbursement of US\$1 billion. Such dependency has frequently forced governments to implement unpopular measures, including spending cuts and

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tariff hikes, which heighten public frustration. Overall, these external pressures limit institutional independence, weaken democratic legitimacy and contribute to social and political unrest.

Contemporary Pakistan has witnessed recurring episodes of democratic unrest, reflecting deep-rooted institutional and political challenges. Conflicts between the judiciary and executive have frequently disrupted governance, undermining public confidence in democratic institutions. Controversial constitutional amendments, such as the 18th and 22nd, have sparked debate over the balance of power and the transparency of legislative processes. Public protests, sit-ins, and blockades have become common tools of political expression, often paralyzing administration and fueling partisan tensions. The reliance on caretaker governments or technocratic setups in times of political crises further indicates widespread mistrust in the elected political class. These examples underscore the persistent fragility of Pakistan's democracy and the challenges in achieving stable, accountable governance.

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Having examined the causes of democratic unrest in Pakistan, it is now important to analyse its consequences. These consequences include weakened governance, economic challenges, social fragmentation, and the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, highlighting the serious costs of prolonged political instability.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan has led to significant political consequences. Frequent government instability and the repeated change of regimes have hindered policy continuity and long-term planning. The repeated crises have weakened parliament and political parties, reducing their effectiveness in governance and lawmaking. Public distrust in democratic institutions has grown, creating a persistent crisis of legitimacy that undermines confidence in elected governments and fuels further political polarization and unrest. These effects collectively erode the foundation of stable and accountable democracy.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan has considerable economic repercussions. Political instability generates uncertainty for

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investors, often leading to capital flight and reduced domestic and foreign investment. Frequent disruptions in government and policy-making hinder long-term economic planning, contributing to inconsistent or poorly implemented reforms. These disruptions have manifested in currency devaluation, rising unemployment, and slower economic growth. Additionally, recurring instability has increased reliance on IMF bailouts, placing further strain on national resources and limiting the government's ability to implement independent, growth-oriented policies. Overall, political turbulence directly undermines the country's economic resilience and development prospects.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan has profound social consequences. Persistent political conflicts and partisan rivalries contribute to polarization within society, fostering intolerance and hostility among different social and political groups. The spread of misinformation and sensationalized narratives further erodes social cohesion, deepening divisions, and mistrust. Young people, facing limited opportunities and disillusionment with governance, often experience demoralization,

while skilled professionals increasingly seek opportunities abroad, contributing to a growing brain drain. These social repercussions weaken the fabric of society, making it more challenging to build inclusive, participatory and resilient democratic institutions.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan has serious security implications. Frequent political crises and mass protests often lead to breakdowns in law and order, straining police and administrative capacities. Such instability is sometimes exploited by extremist groups to advance their agendas, further threatening national security. The persistent turmoil also weakens the state's ability to combat terrorism and organized crime effectively, as resources and attention are diverted to managing political disputes. Reflecting these challenges, the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2025 ranks Pakistan 130th out of 143 countries, highlighting systematic weaknesses in law enforcement, judicial effectiveness, and public safety. Overall, political instability significantly undermines both internal security and public confidence.

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in the state's capacity to maintain peace.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan has profound implications for governance. Frequent protests, sit-ins, and political confrontations often paralyze administrative processes, delaying decision-making and implementation of policies. The quality of public services declines as attention shifts from citizen welfare to managing political crises. Furthermore, the politicization of the bureaucracy undermines merit-based decision-making, resulting in inefficient governance and weakened institutional capacity. Collectively, these factors erode the effectiveness of the state, hinder development, and diminish public trust in government institutions.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan also affects its international standing. Repeated political instability and institutional fragility tarnish the country's democratic image, weakening its credibility and influence in diplomatic relations. Investor confidence is undermined, leading to reduced foreign investment, while relations with international donors and financial

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institutions, including the IMF, are strained. The combination of domestic instability and external economic dependence increases vulnerability to foreign pressure and manipulation, limiting Pakistan's ability to pursue independent policies and secure its national interests on the global stage.

Democratic unrest in Pakistan fundamentally undermines the state by destabilizing the delicate balance between the executive, legislature, and judiciary — the tripod of democracy, as defined by Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Frequent political crises, contested elections, and controversial constitutional amendments repeatedly challenge the constitutional order, weakening institutional authority and public confidence. The **27th**

Amendment, for instance, granted immunity to certain state functionaries, creating a temporary advantage that leaves the system vulnerable to future crises. The erosion of the rule of law creates an environment where impunity and arbitrary governance become more prevalent, further eroding accountability and institutional integrity. As a result, the state struggles

to enforce laws effectively, maintain political stability, and deliver services, perpetuating a cycle of unrest and weakening the foundations of democratic governance.

Achieving democratic stability in Pakistan requires a multi-faceted approach that strengthens institutions, reforms electoral processes, and depoliticizes key state organs. Clear separation of powers, respect for constitutional ~~bound~~ boundaries, and empowered parliamentary committees can reduce institutional interference and ~~also~~ enhance accountability. Electoral reforms, including an independent and technologically upgraded **Election Commission** and transparent result management systems, alongside robust internal party democracy, are essential for credible elections. Merit-based appointments and tenure protection for the judiciary and bureaucracy coupled with clear codes of conduct can depoliticize decision-making. Governance improvements should focus on service delivery and rule-of-law based anti-corruption measures rather than political vendettas, while long-term

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economic planning and reduced dependence on foreign loans can stabilize the economy. Promoting national dialogue, reviving the **Charter of Democracy** and encouraging civil society and media responsibility can rebuild political consensus. Finally, civic education and fostering a democratic culture in schools, along with youth participation in peaceful democratic processes, can nurture informed, engaged citizens committed to sustaining democracy.

Domestic unrest in Pakistan is driven by a combination of institutional imbalance, political polarization, weak governance, socio-economic pressures, and external influences. These elements undermine the constitutional framework, diminish public trust, impede economic development, and disrupt social unity. The resulting consequences include political instability, economic volatility, and a weakened rule of law, highlighting the complex connection between governance and democracy. Nevertheless, there remains a viable path forward that involves strengthening institutions, ensuring credible elections, enhancing governance, and nurturing a democratic culture.

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characterized by dialogue and accountability. Ultimately, the advancement of democracy hinges on collective responsibility and mutual respect for rights and dignity.

"Democracy means not 'I'm as good as you are,' but 'You're as good as I am.'"

(Theodore Parker)

←————→
'The End'