

# Democracy Amid Autocracy in Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Jinnah envisioned Pakistan as a democratic state. Nevertheless, after his departure, the history of Pakistan unfolded some extremely bitter realities in the form of transgressions on the part of policy and decision-makers, both individually and institutionally, that ultimately resulted in the loss of confidence and resources by the nation. The policy and decision-makers in Pakistan particularly among the politicians, military, judiciary, and bureaucracy all were unable to address their respective domains in the larger interest of the nation. Instead of learning from our past we still do not seem to be prepared to accept our follies and to arrange for their avoidance in the future. Challenges faced by the newly independent Pakistan, instead of being addressed appropriately were further worsened by poor performance of individuals as well as institutions. Consequently, urgent issues like constitution-making and providing guidelines based on the culture and society of Pakistan remained unattended. The history of Pakistan's internal developments stands witness to all these failures. The conditions that we are facing now make it incumbent upon the intelligentsia to rationally prepare a work plan for different sections of policy and decision-making bodies for strict adherence to their part of responsibility. There can't be any better time than the present to put forth these questions and explore prospects and prerequisites for a better and more secure journey for Pakistan in the future. This study provides a comprehensive structure for exploring the dynamics of democracy and autocracy in Pakistan, highlighting key themes, historical developments, and avenues for reform.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Democracy, Autocracy, Military, Media, Past and future.

## Introduction

'Democracy amid Autocracy' in Pakistan's political landscape underscores the complex interplay between democratic governance and authoritarian tendencies throughout history. This thematic discussion delves into the historical context, political dynamics, military influence, elite capture, media restrictions, erosion of democratic norms, advocacy in civil society, and the future of democratic reform in Pakistan. The research methodology employed in this discussion combines qualitative analysis of historical events, political scholarship, and insights from academic literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Pakistan's democratic evolution. An attempt is made to draw upon a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis, political science, sociology, and human rights perspectives to examine the intricate dynamics of democracy and autocracy in Pakistan.

The research methodology involves a systematic review of scholarly works, including academic books, journal articles, and policy papers, to elucidate key themes and historical trends shaping

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Pakistan's political landscape. Primary sources such as official documents, speeches, and media reports contribute to a nuanced understanding of specific events and their broader implications for democratic governance. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis techniques are applied to critically evaluate primary and secondary sources, identify recurring patterns, and discern underlying socio-political dynamics. Comparative analysis with international case studies enhances the contextual understanding of Pakistan's democratic challenges and facilitates exploring potential solutions. Additionally, insights from expert interviews and public opinion surveys enrich the discussion by incorporating diverse perspectives and grassroots voices.

By employing a rigorous research methodology grounded in academic scholarship and empirical evidence, this discussion offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between democracy and autocracy in Pakistan and paves the way for informed discourse and policy interventions to strengthen democratic institutions and promote inclusive governance.

### **Historical Context**

Since its inception, political and lawmaking activities in Pakistan have faced severe challenges. The civilian government of Mumtaz Daultana in Punjab failed miserably in maintaining law and order. As a result, the military intervened and imposed Martial Law. On the pretext of Prime Minister Khwaja Nizamuddin's failure to control the situation, Governor General Ghulam Muhammad dissolved his cabinet. On the other hand, the inclusion of Ayub Khan in the cabinet in 1954 by Iskandar Mirza brought politicians and the military establishment head-on-head. Similarly, the constitutional impasse and subsequent dissolution of constitutional assemblies, the jealousy among politicians, and deadlocks among East and West Pakistan created socio-political unrest. They paved the way for the first martial law on October 7th, 1958 (Khan, 2009).

During various martial regimes in Pakistan, fundamental rights were suspended, and political activities were banned. Many politicians, including Husyen Shaheed Suharwardi and Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rahman, were imprisoned over charges of treason. The new Martial Law regime introduced the system of Basic Democracies (BD), which was later used against the Combined Opposition Party's (COP) presidential candidate, Miss Fatima Jinnah. To further strengthen their position, the martial law regime presented a presidential form of constitution in 1962. Opponents of the regime severely criticized these acts.

After enforcing martial law, General Zia presented the Revival Constitutional Ordinance (RCO) to strengthen his hold over the administrative and political system, as Ayub Khan did before him. Nusrat Bhutto and her daughter Benazir were imprisoned in their houses during the 1985 elections. State institutions were used to brush aside any resistance from the political alliance of MRD (Movement for Restoration of Democracy). Zia amended RCO with the 8th amendment for his interest, which became a handy tool for the frequent destabilization of civilian governments in the 80s.

At the end of the 90s, General Musharraf imprisoned Nawaz Sharif and imposed an emergency by suspending the constitution of 1973. Once again, the same old story was repeated to strengthen his grip over politicians and civil administration. This time, the judiciary was also dealt an iron hand to prevent anti-military manoeuvres. Musharraf made the Pakistan Muslim League—Quaid—e—Azam (PML-Q) and consolidated it through local bodies designed by him. The accountability system of Musharraf is reflected in the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) ordinance and the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), which were quite attractive but exploitative and self-centred from within. This experiment pressured corrupt politicians to join their party (PML-Q). Eventually, his tenure ended with his statement that democracy had returned to the country.

However, it turned out to be a kind of democracy where individual opinions and desires were more important than the rights of the public.

Pakistan has a long history of political instability, and civilian rule has always been affected by it. The democratically elected governments have often been under the control or pressure of the army, directly or indirectly. In the past, people who had guns fired shots, with or without the support of the civilian authorities. Those with the power ensured that their interests, fair or unfair, were protected, even if it meant going against the country's internal or external challenges. No civilian government could work independently without the pressure of this undemocratic power. On the other hand, civilian governments did not have autonomy in policymaking and decision-making. Therefore, civil supremacy in Pakistan has constantly been challenged and overruled by invisible directions through visible hands (Ziring, 1999).

### **Politics and the Military**

The military's influence has significantly and persistently shaped Pakistan's foreign policy and administration. Pakistan has historically been subject to indirect influence during civilian administrations and direct military authority through coups. The military, sometimes depicted as the "guardian" of Pakistan's national security, has substantial influence over defence spending, security policy, and strategic decision-making. Through its influence in important state institutions, such as security councils and intelligence agencies, it continues to maintain a strong presence. In addition, the military gains significant economic clout from its involvement in business ventures.

Stephen Cohen's academic writings in "The Idea of Pakistan" (2004) and Ayesha Siddiqa's "Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy" (2007) offer insightful assessments of the military's intricate involvement in Pakistani politics. These writers provide valuable insights into how the military's dominance shapes Pakistan's political environment, bringing stability and challenges to democratic governance. Pakistan's relationship between the civilian government and the army is characterized by intricate power dynamics that considerably impact the country's democratic governance. Stephen Cohen's statement, "Pakistan is not a state with an army, but an army with a state" (2004), accurately reflects this reality. The quote underscores how the military has primarily influenced Pakistani politics, often at the cost of democratic institutions. Scholars like Aqil Shah (2014), Pervez Hoodbhoy (1991), and Ayesha Siddiqa (2007) offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between the Pakistani military and civilian population. Their works highlight the challenges that the military's dominance presents to the promotion of democratic ideals and the implementation of the rule of law. The military's lasting impact highlights Pakistan's ongoing struggle for democracy despite sporadic shifts to civilian governments.

Pakistan's military significantly influences the country's security, foreign policy, and governance, which in turn affects its internal and international affairs. According to Anatol Lieven, the political landscape of Pakistan has consistently been dominated by the military when it comes to making decisions related to security and foreign policy (Lieven, 2012). The military significantly influences various aspects of government, such as foreign policy, economic decision-making, and security measures. It wields its power by intervening directly and through covert actions, which limits the independence of elected civilian authority and curtails its control over crucial state institutions. The power dynamics between military and civilian administrations can significantly impact democracy. Even when civilians are democratically elected, the military establishment may

limit their authority. This creates an unequal distribution of power, making it challenging for democratic institutions to maintain their legitimacy and fulfil their objectives.

When it comes to security, the military plays a crucial role in combating internal threats such as insurgency and terrorism, which often leads to the militarization of political systems and decision-making processes. The military is responsible for border management, intelligence gathering, counterterrorism strategies, and other security missions. When it comes to security, the military plays a crucial role in combating internal threats such as insurgency and terrorism, which often leads to the militarization of political systems and decision-making processes. The military is responsible for border management, intelligence gathering, counterterrorism strategies, and other security missions. Pakistan's military plays a crucial role in determining its foreign policy, particularly regarding its neighbours, Afghanistan and India. The military often influences diplomatic efforts and regional alliances by prioritising security concerns and geopolitical goals. The military in Pakistan also exerts an extensive influence on public administration, infrastructural development, and economic policy. The military directly or indirectly controls critical public infrastructure projects and financial sectors through institutional processes. Academics such as Hassan Abbas (2016), Stephen Cohen (2004), and Ayesha Siddiqa (2007) have deeply analyzed the military's complex impact on Pakistan's security, foreign policy, and governance. Their writings better explain the intricate interactions between civilian and military leadership that have shaped Pakistan's political system.

### **Elite Capture and Political Patronage**

In Pakistan, political patronage and elite capture exacerbate inequality, encourage corruption, and threaten democratic institutions, impeding fair growth and reducing public confidence in political institutions. Political power dynamics are primarily maintained by patronage networks, especially in countries like Pakistan, where informal networks frequently hold sway. These networks, comprised of influential people and organizations, give political leaders essential support by making resources, opportunities, and support systems more accessible (Khan, 2010). They also act as channels for cementing political power, gaining allegiance, and bestowing favours (Rasul, 2013). Furthermore, the trajectory of governance and development can be shaped by patronage networks through their influence on appointments, policy decisions, and resource allocations (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007). However, relying on patronage networks seriously complicates democratic governance and institutional integrity by aggravating inequality, promoting corruption, and undermining merit-based government.

Pakistan's political environment and governance systems are heavily influenced by political families who have concentrated power and maintained a hereditary system of leadership rather than one based on meritocracy. For decades, this has led to the domination of political dynasties such as the Bhutto and Sharif families in the country's political landscape. As a result, public policy is shaped, political authority is consolidated, and new entrants to the political sphere are restricted in their options. Moreover, dynasty politics can potentially create patronage networks, curtail democratic accountability, and stifle political competition. To counteract the effects of dynastic politics, there is a need to reform Pakistan's political procedures to promote meritocracy, transparency, and democratic values. Dynastic politics is prevalent in Pakistan, and it has a significant impact on the accountability and representation of democracy. Instead of being based on merit and won through electoral competition, leadership positions are often inherited within certain dynasties. This concentration of political power within families frequently undermines the norms of democratic administration. As a result, political decision-making processes need more

true representation for various societal segments, as the diversity of views and opinions is limited. Dynastic politics can also weaken accountability systems as family relationships take priority over the general welfare, impeding openness and supervision. Consequently, democratic principles of justice, equality, and responsiveness may be undermined as democratic institutions fail to adequately check the power of political dynasties and keep them accountable to the voters.

### **Limitations on Civil Society and the Media**

Press freedom in Pakistan faces several obstacles and restrictions that hinder journalists' capacity to report freely and hold the powerful accountable. According to Reporters Without Borders, Pakistan ranks low in international press freedom indexes, highlighting the unfriendly environment in which journalists operate (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Journalists' ability to report on sensitive topics such as corruption, human rights violations, and radical religious beliefs is restricted by government censorship, legal constraints, and threats of violence from both state and non-state actors. Investigative journalism and critical speech are further limited by self-censorship by media outlets and journalists themselves.

The works of Amnesty International (2020), Adnan Rehmat (2014), and Zahid Hussain (2018) provide insightful analyses of the challenges faced by journalists in Pakistan about their freedom. These authors point out how impunity, coercion, and censorship undermine the safety and liberty of journalists. Although the constitution guarantees press freedom, the ongoing hurdles and limitations underscore the precariousness of media freedom in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, civil society plays a crucial role in opposing authoritarianism and promoting democratic principles and human rights. Asma Jahangir, a prominent human rights activist, stated, "Civil society must be vigilant in holding the government accountable and protecting fundamental rights" (Jahangir, 2018). Despite facing obstacles such as government repression and threats from extremist groups, civil society organizations and activists continue their efforts to mobilize public opinion, create awareness, and demand accountability from authorities. Ali Cheema (2019), Huma Yusuf (2016), and I. A. Rehman (2019) have all provided insightful analyses of civil society involvement and its function in opposing authoritarianism in Pakistan. The writers highlight the tenacity of civil society in promoting social justice, political reform, and the rule of law. Despite facing several challenges, civil society action remains a vital catalyst for advancing democracy and human rights in Pakistan.

There are significant threats to democracy and pluralism in Pakistan due to state repression and censorship that undermine fundamental freedoms and stifle criticism. As per Human Rights Watch's report in 2021, the Pakistani government continues to target journalists who criticize the state, restrict media independence, and suppress freedom of expression. The Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is an example of repressive regulations that give authorities the power to target individuals who express differing opinions and to control online content. Activists, journalists, and political opponents in Pakistan are being intimidated through enforced disappearances, extrajudicial assassinations, and arbitrary arrests. The deteriorating democratic standards and strengthening of authoritarian power structures have been analyzed by academics such as Ayesha Siddiqi (2016), Tariq Rahman (2014), and Amber Darr (2018), who have highlighted governmental repression and censorship. To preserve Pakistan's democracy and plurality, it is essential to defend the right to free speech and build a robust civil society, as emphasized by these writers.



### **Erosion of Democratic Norms**

Concerns over election manipulation and anomalies have marred the political environment in Pakistan. These issues threaten the credibility of democratic processes and erode public confidence in the voting system. Examples of electoral manipulation include vote rigging, voter intimidation, and biased media coverage, which distort the electoral landscape and jeopardize election fairness (Rashid & Hassan, 2019). Unfortunately, vested interests and solid political players often amplify voting irregularities, sustaining a cycle of impunity and corruption (Khan, 2015). The growth of democracy in Pakistan is hampered by these election malpractices, which weaken democratic institutions and cast doubt on the legitimacy of elected officials (Ahmad, 2016). To combat electoral fraud and hold political actors accountable for their actions, comprehensive reforms are necessary. These reforms aim to improve election openness, bolster oversight mechanisms, and encourage civic engagement.

Pakistan has been facing challenges to its democratic plurality and freedom of expression due to the suppression of dissent and crackdowns on alternative voices. The government has implemented measures restricting divergent opinions and limiting the space for political opposition. These measures include media limitations, activist arrests, and censorship (Zahid, 2018). Aslam (2017) states such crackdowns create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, which hinders democratic discourse and prevents the development of a dynamic civil society. Additionally, singling out opposition members can damage public confidence in the political process and undermine the basic principles of democratic governance (Rasheed, 2019).

The democratic foundations of Pakistan are under threat due to the deteriorating checks and balances in the country. This is seriously jeopardizing parliamentary oversight and judiciary independence. The court's impartiality is being weakened by the politicization of the court, meddling in judicial nominations, and restrictions on judicial autonomy. Similarly, executive domination, secrecy, and insufficient accountability frameworks reduce the legislature's ability to hold the government responsible. These difficulties are undermining institutional integrity, undercutting democratic ideals, and exacerbating Pakistan's governance shortcomings.

### **Advocacy and Resistance in Civil Society**

Civil society is crucial in promoting human rights and democratic values in Pakistan. This is achieved through advocating for institutional reform, social justice, and accountability. Organizations such as the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the Aurat Foundation, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) monitor human rights abuses, empower marginalized communities, and promote political transparency and accountability. They work to eliminate gender-based violence, address systemic inequalities, and strengthen democratic institutions through research, advocacy campaigns, and legal initiatives. Despite government limitations and threats to security, civil society organizations in Pakistan continue to be vital agents of change, amplifying citizen voices and promoting inclusive governance to advance democratic values and human rights.

In Pakistan's political environment, specific challenges and opportunities exist for those who oppose authoritarianism. Activism against authoritarian tendencies is essential but faces obstacles such as government censorship, restrictions on free speech, and threats to the safety of activists. Despite these challenges, legal advocacy, civic mobilization, and global solidarity can effectively promote democratic values and human rights. In Pakistan, leading advocates for these values are organizations like the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF), the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), and the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency

(PILDAT). Pakistani activists work towards greater political accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights by forming strategic alliances, utilizing digital activism and engaging in public awareness campaigns. Their continued efforts to fight for democracy and freedom in Pakistan are vital.

Civil society in Pakistan plays a crucial role in promoting transparency and accountability among public officials and institutions. Several organizations actively monitor government activities, advocate for anti-corruption measures, and promote transparency in decision-making processes. Transparency International Pakistan (TIP), the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), and the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) are some examples of these organizations. Through citizen monitoring, advocacy campaigns, and policy studies, these organizations empower citizens to demand greater accountability from their leaders and institutions. By cultivating a culture of openness and accountability, civil society is essential in strengthening democratic governance and upholding the rule of law in Pakistan. This leads to establishing a more responsive and accountable government that serves the people of Pakistan.

### **The Future of Democratic Reforms**

Although efforts have been made to strengthen democratic institutions in Pakistan, several obstacles still hinder the consolidation of democracy in the country. The persistence of military involvement in politics, weak civilian government, and questionable election results are some factors that threaten stability and democratic norms (Ahmad, 2016). Additionally, socio-economic inequality and ethnic and sectarian conflicts exacerbate political divisions, making it even more challenging to reach a consensus (Iqbal, 2019). Furthermore, the influence of militant groups and religious fanaticism poses a threat to democratic ideals and community cohesion (Rasheed, 2018). Addressing these complex issues will require continuous efforts to enhance institutional resilience, promote inclusive governance, and encourage public participation in the democratic process.

To strengthen governance and promote the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan, it is essential to implement reform programs aimed at fortifying democratic institutions and procedures. Electoral reforms, which include refining voter registration procedures and increasing electoral transparency, are designed to mitigate election anomalies and foster trust in the electoral process. Initiatives to improve parliamentary monitoring and accountability systems also aim to ensure transparency in government and support democratic governance. Moreover, upholding the rule of law and promoting judicial independence is crucial for institutional integrity and protecting people's rights. The development of a robust democratic framework in Pakistan relies on implementing these reform initiatives and advancing democratic values. To strengthen governance and promote the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan, it is essential to implement reform programs aimed at fortifying democratic institutions and procedures. Electoral reforms, which include refining voter registration procedures and increasing electoral transparency, are designed to mitigate election anomalies and foster trust in the electoral process. Initiatives to improve parliamentary monitoring and accountability systems also aim to ensure transparency in government and support democratic governance. Moreover, upholding the rule of law and promoting judicial independence is crucial for institutional integrity and protecting people's rights. The development of a robust democratic framework in Pakistan relies on implementing these reform initiatives and advancing democratic values.

To foster political stability and institutional growth in Pakistan, the cooperation of international actors and multilateral organizations is crucial. The United Nations, the European Union, and other organizations that uphold human rights, improve government efficiency, and enhance electoral

processes provide financial support, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs (Khan, 2016). International alliances also support local initiatives to advance democratic changes by sharing knowledge, exchanging best practices, and advocating for democratic principles (Ahmad, 2018). Besides, diplomatic contacts and international pressure promote accountability and transparency in governance processes by urging governments to comply with human rights standards, the rule of law, and democratic principles (Iqbal, 2019).

## Conclusion

Delving into the findings, the intricate narrative of Pakistan's quest for democratic stability amidst recurring bouts of autocratic interventions unfolds. Historical analyses unveil entrenched power dynamics, recurrent military interventions, and the dominance of elite interests as foundational elements shaping the nation's political landscape. The erosion of democratic norms, compounded by curbs on civil society and media freedoms, accentuates the complexities inherent in democratic governance. These revelations underscore the pressing need to address systemic challenges, including electoral reforms and the preservation of judicial independence, to foster a more inclusive democratic framework.

Moreover, promoting dialogue and collaboration among diverse stakeholders is paramount in navigating the intricate terrain of Pakistan's democratic evolution. International partnerships and diplomatic engagements offer promising avenues for reinforcing democratic values and institutional resilience. By cultivating empathetic discourse and embracing analytical insights, stakeholders can collectively chart a course toward a more robust and equitable democratic order in Pakistan. This scholarly endeavor illuminates the nuances of Pakistan's political landscape and underscores the imperative of collaborative action in safeguarding democratic principles for future generations.

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