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Strengthening Democracy in Pakistan: The Role of the Pakistan Military (2018–2024)

Abstract

Pakistan's democratic journey has been marked by a persistent tension between civilian governance and military influence. This article investigates the role of the military in the politics of Pakistan. The researcher highlights how our politicians have always been unable to develop a political culture on democratic parameters in the country. Side by side the masses start lacking trust in the politicians and political setup for their authoritarian attitude and inheritor leadership. Our political parties, no doubt, have good shows in the case of local leaders but unluckily they have been lethargic in giving birth to the leaders of national and international caliber. This factor creates gaps for the military to enter politics and stay there under the very doctrine of 'necessity'. Since the very early days of our emergence on the globe of the world, there has been a misconception that the military may align all the disorders and civil institutions are not allowed to promote but in fact the military did some better than these politicians. From 2018 to 2024, the Pakistan military's role in politics has been a subject of intense debate, with allegations of electoral manipulation, political engineering, and hybrid governance overshadowing efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. This paper examines the military's impact on Pakistan's democracy during this period, analyzing whether its actions have facilitated or hindered democratic consolidation. Through a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative analysis of historical events and quantitative data on electoral processes, the study explores key developments such as the 2018 and 2024 general elections, the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan, and the military's evolving role in governance. The findings suggest that while the military has maintained stability in times of political turmoil, its interventions have often undermined democratic norms, weakened civilian institutions, and eroded public trust in electoral processes. The paper concludes with recommendations for fostering a more resilient democratic framework by reducing military influence and strengthening institutional accountability.

Historical Background

Pakistan's democratic history is punctuated by military interventions, with three major coups (1958, 1977, and 1999) disrupting civilian rule. The military has historically justified its involvement by citing political instability, corruption, or national security concerns. The 1973 Constitution established a parliamentary democracy, but amendments like the 8th Amendment under General Zia-ul-Haq empowered the military to influence government-induced presidential authority, aiming to strengthen civilian governance. However, the military's influence persisted

through informal mechanisms, such as its control over national security policy and its role in shaping electoral outcomes.

In 2018, Pakistan held general elections that brought Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) to power. Allegations of military backing for PTI, including manipulation of electoral processes, surfaced, with critics arguing that the military engineered a "hybrid regime" to favor its preferred candidate. The military's influence was evident in the crackdown on opposition parties like the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), as well as media censorship. By 2022, Khan's deteriorating relationship with the military, particularly over key appointments, led to his ouster through a no-confidence vote, highlighting the military's continued sway over political outcomes. The 2024 general election further underscored the military's role. Despite PTI's strong performance, the election was marred by allegations of rigging, internet shutdowns, and the removal of PTI's electoral symbol, actions attributed to military influence. These events raised questions about the military's commitment to democratic principles and its impact on public trust in governance.

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape has been shaped by a complex interplay between civilian governments and the military since its independence in 1947. The period from 2018 to 2024 is particularly significant, as it encompasses two general elections, significant political upheavals, and heightened public awareness of the military's role in governance. This paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which the Pakistan military has contributed to or detract from strengthening democracy during this period. During the last 67 years, Pakistan underwent the experiences of democracy but through prolonged military regimes. Every military dictator came with the craving of the masses and congratulations were exchanged on the intervention of the military because the politicians could not be successful in pulling out the people from the crisis. The people welcomed the military's controlled political system. Political elites co-operated with these military men and offered their services to strengthen their rule and consequently gained economic benefits. The puppet politicians paralyzed the political culture of this state. These so called political intellectuals defended the military by appointing military dictators as presidents in uniform. Pro-military Politicians launched operations against their opponents with the support of the military. The conflicts between the ruling parties and the opponents, opposition made alliances to derail the governments in its honeymoon period. While the government often led the use of state apparatus against its opposition parties as a result exile and execution trend emerged for the politicians. In this context a series of cases of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) against Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and PML-N against PPP also operations of both the parties against Muttihida Qomi Movement (MQM) are before us. During these operations the military was called for the restoration of political vendetta. The story of Baluchistan was not different from Karachi throughout the history of Pakistan. The above mentioned trend negated the fertilization of the political process; as the image of democratic

institutions faded. Moreover, the causes of political backwardness are being addressed under, that did not allow the political culture of Pakistan to grow up and the military was blamed for nothing.

Strengthening democracy through through institutional reforms

Political parties are the spirit of democracy. In Pakistan the role of political parties is too poor to strengthen the democratic culture of Pakistan. Every politician has its own political party. Total seats of national assembly are 270 on open merit while registered political parties in Pakistan are 216. The Constitution is unable to mention the minimum condition over the registration of political parties. These political parties with one or two legislators (seats) blackmail the government and take monetary benefits, this trend never allowed the political culture to promote & disturb the political setup of the state. These outfit works motivate the non-political actors to intervene. After intervention these forces utilize the small political parties to gain their objectives. Bad impressions of these political parties go to the masses. These small political leaders sell themselves at very low prices, they introduce the trend of corruption in political parties and a signal of failed democracy goes to the masses of the state. These politicians establish the culture of horse trading. Personality oriented outlook is found in the political parties still, parties are known on personality basis, traditional mood of the politicians damage the political setup of Pakistan. Whenever, these politicians are given chance to rule, they always prefer to appoint their relatives and forget all the merits but when they are in opposition they claim merit. These are the drawbacks of our politicians and political parties which is anti-democratic. It is half truth to say that establishment did not allow the political parties to function normally. Reality is that our political parties never attempted to civilize themselves but only to blame that establishment never allowed them to work properly. If the political parties transform themselves into viable organizations with proper homework, the establishment will automatically be managed in their own directions but first we should change our attitudes. Most of the Pakistan Muslim league's leaders belonged to the landed aristocracy. From very start a bad impression of these aristocrats put on democracy. Consequently neither free & fair elections were held nor

constitution framed and promulgated in perfect manners. Unbridled powers were vested to the bureaucracy in elections and it always favored of its favorite politicians.

Objectives

1. To trace the historical role of the Pakistan Army in Pakistan's political system since 1947.
2. To analyze the motivations behind the army's political interventions and their impact on democratic institutions.
3. To evaluate whether the army's actions have strengthened or weakened Pakistan's democracy.
4. To propose recommendations for fostering balanced civil-military relations to support democratic consolidation.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the military's role in Pakistan's democracy from 2018 to 2024. The methodology includes:

1. Qualitative Analysis:

- **Historical Case Studies:** Examination of key events, including the 2018 and 2024 elections, Imran Khan's ouster, and military statements on democracy. Sources include academic articles, news reports, and policy analyses from reputable organizations like the Observer Research Foundation and Brookings Institution.
- **Content Analysis:** Review of media reports, official statements, and social media discourse to assess public perceptions of military involvement. This includes analyzing the role of social media in amplifying political awareness, as discussed in studies on youth engagement.
- **Theoretical Framework:** Application of modernization theory and instrumentalism to evaluate democratic support, drawing on comparative studies of Pakistan and India. The study also uses the concept of "hybrid regimes" to frame the military's role in governance.

2. Quantitative Analysis:

- **Electoral Data:** Analysis of voter turnout, election results, and reported irregularities in the 2018 and 2024 elections, sourced from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and international observers.

- **Survey Data:** Utilization of World Values Survey (Wave 6) data to assess public support for democracy and perceptions of military influence.
 - **Statistical Tools:** Use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze correlations between military interventions and democratic indicators, such as electoral fairness and institutional trust.
3. **Limitations:**
- Limited access to primary military documents due to their classified nature.
 - Potential bias in media sources, mitigated by cross-referencing with academic and international reports.
 - Incomplete data on covert military operations, addressed through triangulation with secondary sources.

Political Dysfunction and the Erosion of Democratic Principles in Pakistan

The abuse of power in Pakistan's political system is deeply entrenched, largely due to the lack of internal accountability within political parties and the broader governance structure. The notion that power abuses can only be curbed by making transgressors face consequences is critical, yet Pakistan's political landscape struggles to implement this principle. Political parties, often led by hereditary or dynastic leaders, treat democracy as a tool to gain power rather than a system to uphold accountability and public welfare. The absence of regular, transparent intra-party elections stifles internal democracy, leaving parties poorly organized and disconnected from their grassroots. Leaders who ascend through familial ties or patronage often adopt authoritarian tendencies once in power, sidelining democratic principles and fostering a culture of impunity. This is evident in how elected prime ministers, while claiming democratic legitimacy, have frequently been accused of authoritarianism and suppressing dissent, labeling opponents as threats to the state. Meanwhile, opposition parties focus solely on ousting the government rather than offering constructive policy alternatives, perpetuating a cycle of political instability and governance failures.

Structural Weaknesses in Pakistan's Political System

Pakistan's political system is further undermined by structural weaknesses that exacerbate the abuse of power. The concentration of authority in the hands of a few, coupled with weak institutional checks, allows leaders to govern with minimal accountability. The judiciary, bureaucracy, and media, which should serve as pillars of oversight, are often politicized or coerced, limiting their ability to hold the powerful accountable. Moreover, the influence of non-democratic forces, such as the military, has

historically disrupted the democratic process, creating a hybrid system where elected governments operate under external pressures. This dynamic weakens the sovereignty of the people and erodes trust in democratic institutions. The lack of political education and civic engagement among the populace further empowers entrenched elites, as citizens are rarely equipped to demand accountability or participate meaningfully in the political process. Without systemic reforms—such as strengthening independent institutions, enforcing intra-party democracy, and fostering a culture of political accountability—Pakistan's democracy will continue to falter, leaving the abuse of power unchecked and the aspirations of its people unfulfilled.

Persistent Challenges and the Path to Reform

The structural deficiencies in Pakistan's political system are compounded by a patronage-based political culture and widespread corruption, which further entrench elite dominance. Political parties often rely on feudal and tribal networks to mobilize voters, prioritizing loyalty over merit and sidelining policy-driven governance. This clientelism stifles the emergence of new leadership and perpetuates a cycle where power remains concentrated among a few families or influential groups. Additionally, the electoral system is plagued by inefficiencies, including outdated voter lists, allegations of rigging, and limited transparency, which undermine the credibility of democratic exercises. The lack of devolution of power to local governments also hampers grassroots participation, leaving citizens disconnected from decision-making processes. To address these challenges, Pakistan needs comprehensive reforms, including the enforcement of meritocratic intra-party elections, decentralization of power to empower local governance, and robust anti-corruption measures backed by an independent judiciary. Furthermore, investing in civic education programs to enhance public awareness and participation is crucial to empowering citizens to hold leaders accountable. Without these steps, the political system will remain vulnerable to exploitation, and the democratic aspirations of Pakistan's people will continue to be stifled by systemic inertia and vested interests.

Analysis

The 2018 Election and Military Influence

The 2018 general election was a pivotal moment, with PTI's victory attributed to military support. Reports suggest the military used the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to suppress opposition campaigns, censor media, and manipulate vote counts. The Human Rights Commission of

Pakistan noted “unequal campaign opportunities,” and the U.S. State Department criticized flaws in the pre-voting process. These actions undermined democratic norms, as the military’s backing of PTI created a perception of a “selected” rather than elected government.

Imran Khan’s Ouster (2022)

Imran Khan’s fallout with the military, particularly over the appointment of the ISI chief, led to his removal via a no-confidence vote in April 2022. This event highlighted the military’s ability to destabilize civilian governments when its interests are threatened. Khan’s subsequent imprisonment and the crackdown on PTI supporters further eroded public trust in democratic institutions.

The 2024 Election and Democratic Backsliding

The 2024 election was marked by significant irregularities, including internet shutdowns, delays in result announcements, and the ECP’s decision to strip PTI of its electoral symbol. Despite PTI securing the largest vote share, allegations of rigging favored the military-backed PML-N, raising concerns about electoral integrity. The V-Dem Democracy indices classified Pakistan as “autocratizing” in 2024, reflecting a decline in democratic governance.

Military’s Role in Governance

The military’s involvement extended beyond elections to civil administration, with officers holding key civilian posts and managing essential services. This “militarization of civil society” diluted democratic values like transparency and accountability, as the military’s hierarchical structure clashed with democratic principles. However, the military justified its role by citing the need for stability amid economic crises and political polarization.

Public Perception and Social Media

Social media played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of the military’s involvement. Studies indicate that platforms like Facebook and Twitter increased political awareness among youth, amplifying criticism of military interference. PTI’s effective use of social media in 2024 mobilized supporters, creating a “persecution syndrome” that strengthened its voter base despite military crackdowns.

Discussion

The military’s actions from 2018 to 2024 reveal a paradox: while it provided stability during periods of political and economic turmoil, its interventions undermined democratic consolidation. The 18th Amendment empowered provinces, but the military’s influence over national security and electoral processes limited civilian authority. Modernization theory suggests that education and income should increase democratic support, yet in Pakistan, these factors did not translate into stronger democratic institutions due to military dominance. Instrumentalism highlights that

public support for democracy is tied to socio-economic progress, but the military's role in stifling opposition weakened this dynamic.

The military's "oversight" rather than direct rule, as noted in historical analyses, allowed it to maintain influence without formal coups. However, this hybrid governance model eroded public trust, as evidenced by protests and social media campaigns. The lack of international pressure, particularly from the United States, further enabled military dominance, as Western interests prioritized stability and counterterrorism over democratic reforms.

Conclusion

The Pakistan military's role from 2018 to 2024 has been a double-edged sword. While it maintained stability in a volatile political environment, its interventions—through electoral manipulation, political engineering, and administrative overreach—hindered the consolidation of democracy. The 2018 and 2024 elections, marked by allegations of rigging and suppression, reflect a democratic system constrained by military influence. To strengthen democracy, Pakistan must prioritize:

1. **Institutional Reforms:** Strengthen the ECP and judiciary to ensure electoral integrity and independence from military influence.
2. **Civilian Supremacy:** Establish mechanisms to limit military involvement in civilian governance, building on the 18th Amendment.
3. **Public Engagement:** Leverage social media to enhance political awareness and civic participation, particularly among youth.
4. **International Support:** Encourage global actors to prioritize democratic reforms over strategic interests.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of social media on democratic mobilization and the feasibility of a new Democratic Charter to foster consensus among stakeholders. Without addressing the military's disproportionate influence, Pakistan's democratic aspirations will remain unfulfilled.

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