

POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN PAKISTAN: A 'FAILED DEMOCRACY' OR A 'BOTCHED ELECTORAL SYSTEM'? A MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND SUSTAINABILITY QUESTION

Muhammad Junaid Ghauri^{*1}, Naseer Ahmed², Nadia Saleem³, Qazi Farman Ullah⁴

^{*1}Postdoctoral Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Oxford, UK and Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

²Scholar of the Master's Program Media, Technology and Society at the Hochschule Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, Germany

³Assistant Professor at the Department of Mass Communication in Virtual University of Pakistan

⁴PhD Scholar Media and Communication Studies, and Subject Specialist at Elementary and Secondary Education Department, KPK, Pakistan

^{*}junaid.ghauri@oxcis.ac.uk, ^{*}muhammad.junaid@iiu.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *

Muhammad Junaid Ghauri

Abstract

In this paper we have attempted to explore and analyse recurrent political upheavals in Pakistan through the lens of democratic theory, sustainability governance perspective, electoral integrity, and media dynamics. We have examined whether Pakistan should be labelled as a failed democracy or as a country with structural disruptions within its institutional and electoral systems. Bearing in mind the historical political landscape, current institutional environment, and comparative political theory, we argue that normatively Pakistan cannot be labelled as a democratic collapse. However, it can be represented as a country with a 'hybrid political system' characterised by an electoral system that coexists with structural instability including imbalances in civil-military relations, unwanted judicial interventions, disputed electoral management, and intensifying media polarisation. This paper explores the historical origin of the political instability in the country starting from early constitutional crises and military takeovers to the democratic developments after 2008. This paper critically examines how the electoral mechanism, the institutional integrity of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), and the hybrid governance system have shaped the electoral legitimacy in the country. More critically, we have attempted to analyse the role of media in terms of a watchdog and political polarisation actor in the contemporary digitalised information ecology. Analysing the political instability within the premise of sustainability governance, in this paper we have established how recurrent political upheavals interrupt economic planning, education reforms, and climate adaptation strategies. We have proposed three broad political future scenarios including a continued hybrid instability, an institutional reform and democratic consolidation, and a democratic backsliding. At the end of this paper along with offering a way forward for Pakistan, we have argued that Pakistan's challenge lies not in democratic rejection but in institutional distortion. For a sustainable

democratic consolidation electoral reforms, governance continuity, balanced civil-military relations, and responsible media governance are the key requirements.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Right from 1947 i.e. the year of its independence, Pakistan has witnessed recurrent episodes of contested democratic transitions and institutional breakdown which can be labelled as 'political instability' in the country. Political trajectory and history of Pakistan is punctuated with constitutional suspensions, military coups, electoral controversies, judicial interventions, and governance crises. These frequent political upheavals raise a basic question i.e. does Pakistan represent a failed democracy, or the instability in the country is an outcome of a flawed electoral and institutional architecture? Analytically this is a significant distinction to be considered. A 'failed democracy' implies an absence and decline of an electoral competition and representative governance system. And that there is a notable rejection of the democratic norms in the society (Dahl, 1971; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

On the other hand, a 'botched electoral system' suggests a recurrent distortion in the expected outcome because of the power imbalances, partial institutional designs, and electoral engineering despite of the democratic aspirations in the society (Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2013). In case of Pakistan, regular elections are being held since 2008, the consequent civilian governments have completed their tenures one way or the other, and a noticeable expansion has occurred in media pluralism as compared to the pre-2000 eras (Freedom House, 2023; Yousaf, 2021). However, there are still assertions from within and outside the country that the democratic consolidation is still undermined because of the "contested electoral legitimacy, pre-poll engineering, civil-military imbalance, and judicial activism" in Pakistan (Freedom House, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023; Shah, 2014).

In this paper we claim that Pakistan cannot be labelled as a 'failed democracy' in any normative or societal terms. However, it can be argued that Pakistan is a country wherein democracy has often been constrained by imbalance civil-military relations, structural biases and falsifications within its electoral system, and by problematic

media landscape. Political upheaval in Pakistan, primarily, stems less from democratic rejection and more from institutional fragility, electoral manipulations, and from hybrid power configurations. These structural weaknesses along with the media polarisation and economic instability destabilize long-term governance sustainability in the country.

With an intention to develop this argument, firstly we have attempted to scrutinize the historical roots of political instability in the country. Then, we have attempted to conceptualise the debate between electoral distortion and democratic failure within comparative political theory. In the later parts of this paper, we have attempted to examine the electoral system, media's political role, and the sustainability implications of frequent political upheavals in Pakistan before suggesting the future scenarios and reform pathways.

1.1 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

Early Constitutional Instability (1947-1958)

Democratic fragility is historically deep rooted in Pakistan. Right from its independence the country's history is punctuated with bureaucratic dominance, elite competition, and most importantly delayed constitution-making. It is worth noting that there was no constitution in Pakistan in early post-independence years i.e. between 1947 and 1956. So, the country relied only on colonial-era legal frameworks instead of proper and permanent constitution of its own. Frequent interventions by Governor-Generals and changes in prime ministers reflected elite rivalry and institutional weakness.

According to Jalal (1995) early political structure in Pakistan was shaped by an imbalance between fragile representative institutions and centralized bureaucratic authority. The state's security preoccupation is another significant factor that gave rise to and strengthened the reinforced centralized executive power. Talbot (2012) similarly argues during early years democratic consolidation in Pakistan was limited because of

the absence of strong political party institutionalization. Democratic norms had already been weakened by administrative intervention and elite manipulation by the time Pakistan adopted its first constitution in 1956. Pakistan experienced first direct military intervention and interruption of civilian rule as early as 1958 in the shape of military coup enforced by General Ayub Khan. It was justified on grounds of administrative inefficiency and political chaos. This intervention established a precedent: 'the military as arbiter of political order'. Although Ayub introduced a controlled "Basic Democracies" system, it limited centralized authority and mass participation (Rizvi, 2000). Therefore, it can be claimed that the roots of political upheaval lay in elite-level institutional imbalances and not in societal rejection of democracy.

1.2 Recurrent Military Interventions (1969-1999)

Further military interventions in Pakistan in 1969, 1977 and 1999 worsened the situation. Each military coup was followed by a worsening political crisis and increased institutional weakness.

General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup in 1977 followed countrywide protests and agitations over allegedly rigged elections. Shah (2014) argues that almost every time the military interventions in Pakistan have been justified by the electoral legitimacy crises and poor administration. The 1977 incidents depict how controversial elections can weaken and threaten civilian rule especially when institutional safeguards are weak. Zia's prolonged military regime caused unnatural and non-democratic changes in political and legal structures of Pakistan. The regime caused an increasingly embedded military influence within the governance and political systems in the country.

In the same way, General Pervez Musharraf's military coup in 1999 gave rise to unprecedented escalation in tensions between military establishment and the civilian leadership. Rizvi (2000) claims that "Pakistan's civil-military imbalance has historically limited democratic autonomy". The military retained and enjoyed

command and influence over security and over foreign policy domain as well even during civilian periods.

These periodic military interventions developed a pattern of disrupted and interrupted democratization. However, it is worth noting that the political competition somehow continued even during these fragile democratic times. Public mobilisation stayed, political parties emerged and re-emerged, and elections were held periodically. Therefore, it can be claimed that the societal desire and demand for a representative governance remained visible and intact despite the fact that the military dominance continued to constrain democracy.

1.3 Democratic Transitions and Hybrid Governance (2008-Present)

However, there was significant shift in the trend after 2008. For the first time in the country since its independence two consecutive civilian governments completed their tenures i.e. from 2008 to 2013 and then from 2013 to 2018. The democratic resilience is evident from the fact that the 18th Amendment (2010) strengthened provincial autonomy and parliamentary authority.

However, for many notable reasons, the democratic stability and consolidation remained incomplete. Serious allegations from within and outside the country such as election manipulation and electioneering i.e. pre-poll rigging, buying representatives' loyalties, abrupt changes in electoral system, transfer-appointment of blue-eyed bureaucrats etc, raised before, during and after the 2013 and 2018 elections. Particularly, the 2018 election was generally described by national and international observers as influenced by uneven playing fields and pre-poll engineering (International Crisis Group, 2023). Freedom House (2023) highlighted concerns over political rights and civil liberties in the country and termed Pakistan as "partly free". Pakistan faced yet another political crisis in 2022-2023 which further exposed deepening tensions between civil-military institutions. The removal of the then Prime Minister Mr. Imran Khan through a contested vote of no confidence and then subsequent events in the country including

subsequent mass mobilization, judicial activism and interventions, and disputes over election timing deepened and intensified polarization. Digital mobilization and widening polarisation in the media further amplified contestation.

All these developments and sequence of events suggest that contemporary political instability in Pakistan is not because of the absence of elections but by the institutional imbalance and contested legitimacy. Although the integrity and sanctity of elections and electoral process and the civil-military relations remained disputed but the persistence and existence of electoral competition indicate democratic longing, aspiration, and demand in the country.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FAILED DEMOCRACY OR BOTCHED ELECTORAL SYSTEM?

In terms of assessing and evaluating Pakistan's political trajectory, it is pertinent to understand and articulate what is meant by a 'failed democracy'.

2.1 Defining Democratic Failure

According to Robert Dahl (1971) democracy (polyarchy) is a system characterized by participation and contestation. Keeping in view Dahl's conceptualisation, democratic failure would mean the restricted political participation, suppression of opposition, and the absence of meaningful competition.

Levitsky and Way (2010) proposed the notion of 'competitive authoritarianism'. They argued that in such a system formal democratic institutions apparently exist but the authorities and power elites exploit and abuse state power to manipulate and tilt the playing field. In such systems elections are held but level-playing field and competition is structurally uneven if not non-existent.

Now, if these frameworks are applied to Pakistani case, then one can argue that the situation is complex in this country. As of today, opposition parties are there and operate openly. Elections are being held continuously since 2008 with a slight gap during 2022-2023. Although polarised and censored but still media operates as platform where debate is vibrant. According to these

characteristics, the definition of outright authoritarian collapse cannot be applied on Pakistan. Instead, in Pakistani system electoral processes coexists with the structural distortions which implies that this system is more closely similar to a hybrid or competitive authoritarian model.

2.1.1 Party Institutionalization and Elite Capture

Weak party institutionalization is usually labelled as an indicator of democratic fragility in any system. In Pakistan, political parties have historically relied on dynastic leadership and patron-client networks instead of ideological consolidation (Waseem, 2006). Such approach encourages elite competition over policy-driven governance which can ultimately destabilize democratic consolidation.

However, elite capture does not equalise to a complete democratic failure. There are examples available in the world where democracies retained electoral legitimacy despite the fact they also experienced patronage politics. The key concern here is whether the institutions ensure accountability and procedural fairness or not?

2.1.2 Electoral Integrity and Institutional Design

For an ideal and legitimate democratic system electoral integrity is a key and central ingredient. Norris (2014) argues that level playing fields, transparent vote counting, and impartial electoral commissions are the integral pre-requisites for credible elections. He argues that the public trust in electoral system and process declines when post-election judicial intervention and pre-poll manipulation becomes normalized.

In Pakistan, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has faced allegations of mismanagement, deliberate delaying tactics in holding elections, weakness and bias in various electoral cycles. Controversies surrounding the make-up of caretaker governments and their powers, candidate disqualification, assigning symbols, and the delimitation processes have contributed to the scepticism against ECP. Such distortions in the shape of controversies and allegations against key institutions such as ECP undermine

confidence without necessarily eliminating democratic demand, longing, aspiration, and participation.

Therefore, keeping in view the above conceptual analysis, it can be claimed that it would be analytically imprecise if Pakistan is labelled as a 'failed democracy'. Instead, and more accurately, Pakistan can be labelled as a state characterised by recurrent electoral distortions within a competitive political environment influenced by institutional fragility and civil-military imbalance.

2.1.3 Linking Political Upheaval to Sustainability

Where there is political instability there will be long-term sustainability implications. Governance paralysis and failures during crises usually disrupts economic planning, delays policy implementation, and diverts attention from climate adaptation and education reform. According to the World Bank (2023) the macroeconomic instability and imbalance in Pakistan constrained reform continuity and development spending.

Institutional continuity is also undermined by recurrent political upheaval. Such political upheavals cause leadership changes in ministries, increase in bureaucratic uncertainty, and stall development projects. In a country as climate-vulnerable as Pakistan, such political instability and discontinuity usually weaken resilience planning.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the causal relationship between electoral distortion and democratic failure is not merely theoretical. Rather, it has tangible implications for sustainable governance in any country.

2.2 Electoral System Design and Institutional Fragility

As a next step in building the argument regarding relationship between electoral distortion and democratic failure, one can ask if, in normative terms, Pakistan is not a failed democracy then the question arises that how does its electoral system contribute to or give rise to recurring instability? For any democracy to be stable and consolidated it must have a proper, credible, and trustworthy electoral design. Electoral integrity is the key in

this context. An electoral system, contrary to its basic intended objective, can cause and generate political upheaval if it lacks public trust in terms of allegedly facilitating manipulation and/or by producing disproportionate outcomes.

2.2.1 The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) System

Electoral system for National Assembly constituencies in Pakistan operates under a First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system in terms of democratic electoral process. In this system, a contestant with the most votes in a constituency wins, even if they do not have majority support (Farrell, 2011; Norris, 2014). Although this system is common in different parts of the world but there is a possibility of disproportionate seat allocations in terms of vote share (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005; Lijphart, 2012). Electoral system design does have an integral impact on shaping representation, political stability, and party fragmentation in a country (Norris, 2014). In democracies like Pakistan where political polarisation is on the higher side, FPTP can cause amplification in regional strongholds. Pakistan has seen tilted national outcomes because of the regional party dominance in provinces such as Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh.

After 2018 general elections, particularly, small vote differentials have been observed being translated into significant seat advantages in Pakistan. Critics have argued that the absence of level-playing field, pre-pol constraints, and structural imbalances the political competition was distorted in the country (International Crisis Group, 2023). In such scenarios, even when procedural rules are formally followed, perceptions of uneven playing fields can affect legitimacy.

Therefore, it can be argued that although the FPTP is not an undemocratic system inherently but in institutionally fragile and politically polarized contexts like Pakistan it may exacerbate winner-takes-all dynamics. This results in undermining the cooperative governance and intensifies post-election contestation.

2.2.2 The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and Electoral Integrity

Similarly, the election process supervisory bodies such as electoral commissions in any democracy are considered as crucial to public trust in the democratic process. Electoral integrity depends on the provision of level-playing fields, equal campaign environment, just administration, transparent vote process, and trustworthy dispute resolution mechanisms (Noris, 2014). In case of Pakistan, during and after almost all election cycles, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has faced repeated allegations of controversial decisions such as; making-up biased caretaker governments with unconstitutional powers, delaying the delimitation processes, unfair disqualifications, and dubious symbol allocations. The International Crisis Group (2023) has reported concerns about restrictions on political campaigning and pre-poll engineering during recent electoral crises in Pakistan.

In societies like Pakistan, it's not necessarily the systemic frauds required to undermine the trust in democratic process but only perceptions may also cause the delegitimization of the outcomes. In hybrid regimes the formal democratic procedures are usually maintained through administrative, legal, or coercive pressures while delicately influencing political competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In Pakistan, serious and unprecedented tensions were observed between the ECP, executive branch, and judiciary over provincial polls and election timing during the 2022-23 political crisis. Unprecedented institutional confrontation and hostility emerged because of the judicial intervention in terms of court orders regarding elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab provinces. This is how electoral management may become a site of political struggle instead of a neutral administration.

A democracy may appear to be botched rather than failed if the supervisory authorities of the electoral process are perceived and labelled as compromised and politically biased. This means that the democratic mechanism does exist but its operation is considered controversial.

2.2.3 Civil-Military Imbalance and Hybrid Governance

No analysis of political instability in Pakistan can be completed unless the historic civil-military relations are addressed properly. Historically, the military in Pakistan has placed itself as guardian of stability and national security. After the general elections of 2008, the conventional direct military rule has vanished but hybrid governance patterns are still there. According to Shah (2014) Pakistani military has maintained its influence as an institution through overt interventions and by subtly taking part in indirect political engineering.

Hybrid governance models give space to the informal power networks along with the formal democratic institutions. For instance, the civilian government may exercise authority over domestic policy but foreign and security policy would remain heavily under the influence of the military establishment. This results in blurring accountability lines. Hybrid governance gives rise to severe distortions in the electoral process and in electoral politics. Political actors lose their trust and belief in procedural fairness in the electoral process if they start perceiving that outcomes would be influenced by some extra-electoral forces. The 2018 and 2022 general elections in Pakistan were widely debated in terms of the 'hybrid regime' thesis, where civilian leadership was considered as aligned with military preferences (International Crisis Group, 2023).

However, it is pertinent to differentiate between democratic collapse and structural imbalance. Civilian governments in Pakistan have passed constitutional amendments, exercised legislative authority, and completed terms since 2008. Still, institutional irregularities create repeated friction. This imbalance contributes to political upheaval in two ways: there will be civil-military confrontation when civilian leaders challenge perceived establishment influence, and political polarisation would be intensified because of the public mobilization around 'systemic injustice' narratives.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the instability in Pakistan is deeply intertwined with unresolved civil-military boundaries.

2.2.4 Judicial Activism and Institutional Conflict

Since 2007, judiciary in Pakistan's political landscape has emerged as a powerful and influential political actor. The Lawyers' Movement (2007-09) strengthened constitutional review and restored judicial independence but, at the same time, judicial activism has also intensified political contestation.

Frequent disqualification of elected officials under constitutional clauses, electoral directives, and Suo-motu interventions have placed courts at the center of political disputes. There is no doubt that judicial oversight is crucial to constitutional democracy but governance can be destabilized because of its politicization. Freedom House (2023) notes concern regarding uneven application of accountability mechanisms and politicized legal processes. Public trust in neutral adjudication and arbitration declines when courts are thought to be selectively intervening in political matters.

During the 2022-23 political crisis in Pakistan, the Supreme Court issued rulings regarding election timing that clashed with executive and ECP positions. This inter-institutional confrontation enhanced and amplified perceptions of systemic instability in the country. Civil-military imbalance, electoral management controversies, and Judicial activism together give rise to a volatile institutional environment. Political actors increasingly litigate political disputes which results into deepening polarization.

2.2.5 Polarization and Elite Competition

Political polarization has deepened and intensified in Pakistan over the past decade. Major political opponents frame each other not merely as competitors but as existential threats. Media magnification and social media intensification have intensified this trend. Coalition governments fight hard to maintain stability because of mistrust. Under such conditions elite competition becomes zero-sum. FPTP's winner-takes-all structure strengthens confrontational politics.

According to Levitsky and Way (2010) because institutions lack deep-rooted legitimacy therefore

the competitive authoritarian systems usually experience cycles of intense disputation. Recurrent political crises in Pakistan reveal this trend where governments are formed after elections but post-election disputes cause instability. However, this does not mean that political polarization alone causes democratic failure. There are examples where despite severe political polarization no systemic collapse were observed in many established democracies. The key difference, however, lies in the institutional strength. In case of Pakistan though, the political polarization is converted to crises primarily because of the weak dispute resolution mechanisms and deeply rooted civil-military confrontations.

2.2.6 Economic Instability and Political Crisis

Economic fragility is another key factor to be considered while understanding the political upheaval in Pakistan. Repeated IMF programs, inflationary pressures, and fiscal deficits badly hammer the governance capacity. According to the World Bank (2023) the development trajectory in Pakistan is severely affected due to the macroeconomic challenges in the country. Economic crises amplify political contentions. Increasing unemployment and inflation cause legitimacy crises for governments. Opposition movements exploit economic crises to challenge authorities. Such circumstances affect sustainability planning. Fiscal crises and recurrent government changes badly affect long-term development projects, education reforms, and climate adaptation strategies.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the economic fragility is directly proportional to the political instability in a country. And, this trend has been observed repeatedly in Pakistan.

3.0 REFRAMING THE CORE QUESTION

Drawing on the above analysis, we can claim that the persistent political upheaval in Pakistan is not an outcome of the 'democratic failure' in the country rather it is more because of institutional instability. Pakistan has its own constitutional frameworks, electoral competition is still there, and political mobilization is not completely vanished yet. However, recurrent political

instability prevails in the country because of the economic fragility, tensions in the civil-military relations, hybrid governance structures, electoral management controversies, and judicial activism. A 'failed democracy' essentially means that there is a systemic rejection of democratic norms in a country. However, in Pakistan, political parties command strong followings, public participation in the electoral process remains high, and the voter turnout varies but it is still there. Vibrant media debate and active civil society are the indicators that the longing, aspirations, and demand for a continued democratic system is still there.

The more accurate diagnosis of the problem of 'political upheaval' in Pakistan turns out to be the 'structural imbalance' i.e. the democratic functioning in Pakistan is distorted because of the economic instability, poor electoral design, institutional biases, and hybrid governance system. This 'structural imbalance' not only badly affect political legitimacy in the country but also hamper governance continuity, which is essential for long-term sustainability planning in areas such as economy, education, and climate policy.

4.0 MEDIA LIBERALIZATION AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Pakistan experienced a rapid and unprecedented growth of private TV channels after 2002 which transformed the political landscape in Pakistan. Dozens of private news channels emerged in the country under the liberalization of broadcasting General Pervez Musharraf. This expansion in the electronic media diversified political discourse and led to an enhanced pluralism in the country. However, this expansion also gave rise to political alignment into the media ecosystem of the country along with an increased competitive sensationalism and commercialization. The media industry in Pakistan works in a commercial environment where ratings (TRPs) and advertising competition significantly influence programming and editorial decision making. Consequently, political confrontation is prioritised over deliberations in political talk shows. Heated debate-based talk shows amplify political polarization and reinforce antagonistic

and binary narratives instead of supporting consensus-building (Yousaf, 2021).

Although the media liberalisation gave rise to an extended freedom of expression however it also intensified fragmentation and division in the public sphere of Pakistan. Competitive TV channels explicitly aligned themselves with particular political parties/narratives. Such a political parallelism was intensified even more during major political conflicts such as 2014 protests, 2018 general elections, and during 2022-23 political upheaval. Media industry especially the news channels face grim media freedom challenges, self-censorship, and regulatory pressures. Such circumstances create an environment where media is vibrant but also constrained. In such situations where certain narratives are amplified and others are played down the public loses their trust media neutrality (Freedom House, 2023).

Therefore, it is argued that the polarization in media becomes a double edge sword by enhancing democratic contestation in terms of providing platforms for debate, but at the same time it also delegitimizes political opponents and widens societal divisions.

5.0 MEDIA AS WATCHDOG OR POLITICAL ACTOR?

Democratic theory suggests that media performs a function of a watchdog in a society thereby holding the powerful and decision makers accountable (Christians et al., 2009; Norris, 2023; Schudson, 2008). However, in practice, news media in Pakistan has rolled between active political participation and watchdog journalism (Freedom House, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2010; Rehmat, 2012; Siraj, 2009; Yusuf, 2012;).

Investigative reporters have played a notable role in exposing corruption, institutional misconduct, and governance failures. This is true that such journalistic practices strengthen democratic accountability. However, media channels in Pakistan have also been blamed for media trial tactics and for selectively framing allegations against particular political camps to align with political interests (Rehmat, 2012; Waseem, 2012; Zia, 2018). Advertising competition has blurred

the lines between journalism and political activism in Pakistan. Opinion-driven and slanted programs have taken over the factual, impartial, and evidence-based news reporting. During crises, media narratives actually escalate tensions instead of facilitating institutional resolution (Yousaf, 2021).

Such tensions and the partisan role of media is evident during the 2022–23 political crisis in Pakistan. Media framed parliamentary and court proceedings and the subsequent mass protests in and emotionally charged terms. Such media coverage of the political upheaval amplified polarized interpretations and intensified public anxiety (Freedom House, 2023).

Therefore, it can be argued that, within the Pakistani media and society contexts, media contributed to the political upheaval by shaping its tempo and tone along with a continuous and sensational reporting. The coverage and portrayal of political crisis into a 24-hour spectacle amplified public mobilization and reduced the space and potential for a sound institutional negotiation.

6.0 DIGITAL MEDIA, MISINFORMATION, AND ALGORITHMIC POLARIZATION

With the rise and widely use of social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube etc in Pakistan reshaped its political landscape and dynamics quite significantly. These digital media platforms facilitated the public to directly communicate with the political parties and leaders. While traditional gatekeepers were bypassed and the communication process was comparatively democratised, the level and intensity of misinformation and echo chambers also increased. Research findings show that the emerging digital activism in Pakistan has played a key role in strengthening political narratives and mobilising the youth. Viral content and hashtag trends create and disseminate outrage and counter-outrage rapidly (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

These algorithm-driven digital media platforms usually offer polarised and emotionally charged content by prioritising engagement. This characteristic of digital platforms results in intensified partisan identities (Bakshy et al.,

2016; Brady et al., 2017; Cinelli et al., 2021; Sunstein, 2017). Research demonstrate that digital misinformation spread more rapidly than the actual information during political conflicts which complicates the institutional resolution and situation even more (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The digital sphere, just like traditional media, also perform the dual function i.e. democratises the communication process but increases the risk of destabilisation at the same time. The digital activism helps in empowering marginalised voices such as independent journalists, civil society organizations, and youth activists. Independent journalists turn to digital platforms to criticise elite dominance which they cannot do on traditional media because of conventional editorial controls and gatekeeping (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023; Tufekci, 2017).

The digital divide and the political mobilization are interconnected. For instance, digital platform users in the urban centres with high digital connectivity participate in online political debate more actively as compared to the users in rural centres with low digital connectivity. This uneven digital engagement may give rise to the distorted perceptions of opinions at regional and national levels (Norris, 2001; Pew Research Centre, 2021; van Dijk, 2020; UNDP, 2022). When policy debates turnout to be reactive and emotional instead of long-term and evidence based then an environment of misinformation may emerge which ultimately hamper the sustainability governance.

7.0 SOCIETY, YOUTH BULGE, AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Pakistan is a country in South Asia with highest number of youth population. Scholars describe this ‘youth bulge’ as an opportunity and as a risk at the same time (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Urdal, 2006; UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Youth is an opportunity when facilitated to integrate economically and politically. They become a challenge and risk when face exclusion, political frustration, and unemployment (Bloom et al., 2003; Cincotta et al., 2003; ILO, 2022). UNDP Pakistan (2022) emphasizes the significance of youth empowerment for sustainable governance. If the youth is dissatisfied

then the inflation and economic stagnation will increase. Political parties gradually mobilize youth through digital platforms to spread their manifestoes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). The politicization of youth and media polarization are deeply interconnected. Digital activism strengthens youth voices, but at the same time it can channel frustration into confrontational politics (Sunstein, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015).

It is worth noting that youth mobilization not necessarily always means destabilization. It can amplify democratic participation and inclusion however it can easily descend towards anti-system rhetoric if the institutional trust is low (Loader et al., 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

8.0 POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY GOVERNANCE

Political upheaval in any country has serious implications for sustainability. Political conflicts disrupt policy making and continuity, they cause delays in reforms, and also limit administrative efficiency. Stable governance is mandatory for a long-term and sustainable development planning especially in the fields of education reforms, climate adaptation, and energy transition.

The macroeconomic instability is one of the major obstacles in Pakistan's development trajectory. Political instability and lack of continuous governance damage investors' trust, interrupt timely budget approvals, and disrupt negotiations with global financial institutions. This whole situation causes fiscal instability which results in limited public investment in climate resilience and education (World Bank, 2023). Political instability also demoralizes institutions and the decision makers which ultimately deteriorate policy implementation. Leadership challenges make decision makers and ministries hesitant to pursue ambitious reforms.

Political discontinuity particularly makes climate policy more vulnerable. Pakistan faces serious climate challenges, including heatwaves, glacial melt, and flooding. Effective policy making, adaptation, and implementation require continuous funding and consensus across the board. And, in case of political upheaval the decision makers' attention is diverted from these priorities. Similarly, long-term focus and

commitment is mandatory requirement for the education reforms. Recurrent changes in bureaucratic and ministerial leadership interrupt infrastructure planning, teacher training initiatives, and curriculum reforms.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the political instability undermines sustainable development capacity along with affecting the electoral legitimacy.

9.0 MEDIA, LEGITIMACY, AND DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY

The role of media is crucial in shaping legitimacy to various narratives. During elections the campaign outcomes are influenced because of the media framing. Even when courts try to interfere or arbitrate the media framing does affect and shape public perceptions about judicial neutrality. Similarly, the media's meaning making and opinion making tendency influences public trust during economic crises (Entman, 2004; Norris, 2011; Voltmer, 2013).

Democratic sustainability meaningfully depends on shared belief in procedural fairness along with the formal institutions. Institutional legitimacy becomes vulnerable and sometimes doubted when majority of the civil society considers the electoral system as manipulated and engineered (Easton, 1975; Schedler, 2013; Tyler, 2006). At the same time, democracy is weakened when media criticism is suppressed. The challenge, however, lies in creating and maintaining a balance between the freedom of expression and responsible journalism (Christians et al., 2009; Habermas, 2006; Schudson, 2008).

Therefore, it is mandatory to take media governance into serious consideration for an effective and meaningful institutional reforms. The democratic discourse can be strengthened by ensuring that the media literacy programs are in progress, journalists are under state protection, and that the independent regulatory frameworks are intact.

10.0 RECONNECTING MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The overall analysis so far in this paper suggests that the political upheaval in Pakistan is not a simple phenomenon. Rather, it is an outcome of

a complex interaction between economic fragility, civil-military tensions, media polarization, and flaws in electoral system. Media plays a key role as a platform that encourages democratic mobilisation and accountability. But at the same time, it intensifies instability and increases uncertainty through misinformation and sensationalism.

Similarly, society remains profoundly politically motivated and engaged. Protest movements, voting turn outs, and the digital activism express democratic aspiration instead of political apathy. So, the central issue here is the institutional decline and deterioration instead of democratic rejection.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the political sustainability can only be achieved if there is an alignment and synchronisation between electoral integrity, institutional design, and media responsibility. Media polarization also hampers sustainability governance because it affects across the board consensus over long-term policy priorities including economic stability, education reforms, and climate policy.

11.0 SCENARIO DEVELOPMENT: POLITICAL FUTURES FOR PAKISTAN

In this paper we have attempted to develop and suggest forward-looking political scenarios for Pakistan instead of merely offering a cause-and-effect descriptive analysis. In our scenario analysis we do not intend to predict the future rather we have attempted to outline plausible trajectories based on the existing structural conditions in Pakistan. Bearing in mind Pakistan's political history we offer three broad scenarios including a continued hybrid instability, an institutional reform and democratic consolidation, and a democratic backsliding.

11.1 Scenario 1: Continued Hybrid Instability

According to the scenario 1 Pakistan would operate within a hybrid political framework featuring the most problematic civil-military rifts, periodic elections, and frequent legitimacy crises. Electoral integrity would remain disputed because of the wide spread institutional mistrust, lack of level playing fields during campaign environments, and because of the allegations of

pre-poll engineering. Polarization in media would keep on intensifying, and digital activism would continue to magnify hostile politics.

Civil-military relations in Pakistan is one of the core issues in this regard. Although the military do not interfere directly and explicitly in the form traditional overt coups but implicit and informal influence continue to shape key policy domains. Judicial intervention in political and administrative matters also cause recurrent constitutional crises. In terms of economic condition of the country, the development spendings are hindered because fiscal instability and repeated IMF negotiations. Climate adaptation strategies also hindered because of lacking long-term consensus among political parties. Infrastructure and education reforms also remain vulnerable because of political turmoils.

This scenario is in line with the patterns pointed out in competitive authoritarian systems (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In such systems conventional democratic institutions do exist but with structural disruptions. So, in a nutshell it can be said that in this scenario democratic aspiration do persist but political consolidation still remains vague. In Pakistan, given its political history, this scenario is more likely to continue. Therefore, in terms of the sustainability implications, the governance would remain reactive instead of being strategic. Sustainable development planning would be weakened by the political instability and uncertainty. In such a scenario, sustainability planning remains inconsistent due to recurring political disruptions.

11.2 Scenario 2: Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation

This is a more optimistic view. According to this scenario the political stakeholders would consider that the sustained instability would further deteriorate both the economic situation and legitimacy in the country. A political consensus is more like to emerge across parties regarding institutional balance and electoral reform.

This scenario suggests key developments such as introducing reforms in the electoral system to minimise 'winner-takes-all polarization' (Norris, 2014). Maintaining a clear civil-military boundary through a well-thought-out parliamentary

oversight would help in democratic consolidation (Shah, 2014). Transparency and autonomy of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is the key in this regard. To restore an effective institutional balance demands for judicial restraint in politically sensitive issues. Reforms in the media governance with an objective of ensuring journalist protection and emphasizing independent regulation would help in democratic consolidation.

This scenario suggests that the political competition would stay but it would become less existential. Media debate would become more accountable. And, the misinformation impact can be reduced through digital literacy programs. Economic stability would improve with the increase in investor's confidence in the governance system. Education reforms and the climate adaptation strategies would receive more sustained political support across political stakeholders. And, the long-term sustainability planning would become more feasible.

The likelihood of this scenario is moderate but subject to the institutional commitment and elite cooperation. And, in terms of sustainability implication the governance continuity and resilience would be enhanced with the democratic consolidation in the country.

11.3 Scenario 3: Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Drift

Third proposed scenario suggests that the authoritarian steps and mechanism would be intensified as a result of confrontation between key institutions and because of the escalation in political polarisation. Restrictions on media would increase under the pretext of regulations. Digital activism and activism and the civic sphere through digital platforms would be contracted. Legal and administrative restrictions would squeeze electoral contest among political parties. Researchers label such situation as a rise of competitive authoritarianism from hegemonic controls (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Such democratic backsliding trends have been noted particularly in countries where institutional checks and trust have been weakened (Freedom House, 2023).

Such a shift has already been noted in Pakistan under the pretext of maintaining law and order. Although an overt and explicit military intervention and rule is not on the cards but a centralized executive authority may expand quite remarkably. Short-term stability could be achieved but the decline in democratic legitimacy would not be controlled. With the economic deterioration frustration among the youth in the country would be intensified.

So, depending on the institutional responses to polarization in Pakistan there is a moderate likelihood for this scenario to prevail. In terms of sustainability implications, it can be suggested that there could be a short-term order in place but the long-term fragility of the governance would remain. And, the suppression in the political competition would reduce the chances of policy innovation and accountability

12.0 COMPARATIVE EVALUATION

Continued hybrid instability is the most probable near-term trajectory that can be applied to the situation in Pakistan. Historical civil-military confrontation and institutional culture make swift transformation unlikely. However, prolonged instability imposes economic costs that may encourage and incentivise reform.

However, the reform scenario requires political elites to prioritize institutional strengthening over short-term advantage. Historically speaking this seems to be challenging but not impossible. The 18th Amendment (2010) is an example that reflects that consensus across the political parties is achievable under pressure. Authoritarian drift remains a risk if polarization escalates without institutional mediation.

Therefore, it can be claimed that Pakistan as a state stands at a structural crossroads rather than at democratic collapse.

13.0 A WAY FORWARD TOWARDS BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN

At this stage of this paper, we would suggest a way forward including several steps for a meaningful transition toward institutional reform and sustainability in Pakistan. These measures include:

- reforms in the electoral system to protect and strengthen the ECP,
- rebalancing the civil-military relations by clarifying the institutions' constitutional boundaries,
- balancing the judicial institution especially by providing guidelines to limit the judicial intervention in the political matters,
- reforming the media governance in terms of protecting journalists and media freedom, promoting media literacy, and by ensuring linguistic and regional participation,
- and by ensuring stability in the economic and sustainability fields.

We argue that for a sustainable democracy governance continuity, credible competition, and institutional equilibrium are the necessary requirements along with the elections

14.0 PAKISTAN IN NEXT FIVE YEARS

Looking forward to the next five years in Pakistan, it is unlikely to witness an immediate democratic stability and consolidation or experience complete democratic collapse. Rather, the most probable trajectory is a continued hybrid political competition characterised by recurrent crises, institutional confrontation and electoral instability. Pakistan's political landscape seems to be extremely participatory: youth activism, voter mobilization, and intense media engagement reflect that democratic longing and aspiration is still persistent. However, democratic consolidation would be negatively affected by poor and allegedly biased electoral management system, institutional confrontations such as tensions in civil-military relations, and judicial activism. Pakistan would remain as a procedurally electoral state but without achieving any substantive democratic stability and consolidation if above mentioned structural instabilities persist. It is assumed that the democratic process would survive, at least in near future, because of the fact that an overt military rule would not be accepted internationally and because of the cost it may inflict on the country. However, survival cannot be considered as strength. Without reforms, economic instability would continue to hinder institutional instability, political polarization

would increase, and the governance would remain reactive rather than strategic. The key and immediate risk is not abrupt military or authoritarian takeover but gradual democratic erosion through weakened institutional coordination, media polarization, selective accountability, and distrust.

For Pakistan to grow into an ideal democracy and a sustainably strong political state, reforms must focus on institutional balance and equilibrium instead of focusing on personalities. First, electoral credibility must be enhanced. The Election Commission of Pakistan should function with increased transparency, technological modernization, and insulation from partisan influence. Considering reforms in electoral design such as incorporating proportional representation elements, may minimise winner-takes-all polarization and improve representation.

Second, civil-military boundaries must be constitutionally clarified and operationally respected. Civilian supremacy in policymaking, especially in economic planning and domestic governance is the key for sustainable democracy. Institutional dialogue instead of confrontation should define inter-institution relations.

Third, judicial restraint and procedural consistency are very important and essential. Without assuming the role central political arbiters in day-to-day political conflicts, the courts must remain guardians of constitutionalism only. Predictability strengthens institutional trust.

Fourth, media reform is essential. Media literacy initiatives, journalist protection, and independent regulation can minimise polarization while ensuring the freedom of expression. Digital misinformation should be dealt through civic education instead of imposing censorship.

Finally, political sustainability depends on social and economic stability. Cross-party consensus on fiscal stabilization, education reform, and climate adaptation would safeguard long-term policy from electoral cycles. Sustainable democracy is mainly about governance continuity and social resilience and not merely about recurrent credible elections.

In conclusion, we argue that the democratic future of Pakistan depends more on institutional recalibration and stability and less on rhetorical commitment. If reforms are undertaken with inclusivity and seriousness then the next five years could mark a transition from recurrent instability toward gradual stability and consolidation. Without such reforms, hybrid instability may persist but democratic aspiration itself is unlikely to disappear.

15.0 CONCLUSION

Pakistan's political upheaval can be best described as a result of recurrent institutional disruptions and destabilization instead of evidence of democratic failure. The country holds media pluralism although polarised, political mobilization, and electoral competition. However, civil-military confrontations, political mobilization and polarization, structural imbalances within the electoral system, media polarization, and judicial intervention undermine democratic stability and consolidation. Recurring instability imposes sustainability costs. Governance discontinuity weakens economic planning, education reform, and climate adaptation. Political polarization intensifies societal disintegration and fragmentation.

Institutional sustainability is the key challenge. A democracy cannot thrive if its media ecosystem intensifies division without accountability, if its electoral system and mechanisms lack integrity and credibility, and if its governance structures remain vulnerable to hybrid influence. Pakistan's path forward lies in reform rather than rupture. These challenges also directly affect sustainability governance, as instability disrupts long-term policy continuity. By rebalancing civil-military relations, protecting and ensuring responsible media pluralism, stabilizing and protecting economic governance, and by strengthening electoral credibility Pakistan can transform from recurrent upheavals toward resilient democracy. Therefore, the question is not whether Pakistan is a failed democracy, but whether it can correct structural distortions before instability erodes long-term sustainability.

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