



Diluting Social Contract in Pakistan: Investigating the Impacts of Social Change on Political Landscape in Pakistan

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Abstract

The dissertation critically examines how evolving patterns of social change, particularly urbanization, demographic shifts, the rise of an educated middle class, and the erosion of traditional authority structures, have diluted the classical social contract in Pakistan and transformed its political landscape. Grounded in interpretivist epistemology and informed by classical and contemporary social contract theories, the study employs a qualitative research design comprising semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Moreover, drawing from perspectives of students, academic experts, and political activists, the study interrogates the shifting dynamics of state-society relations in a context marked by political disillusionment, governance crises, and the growing assertiveness of youth and civil society. The findings reveal that the traditional foundations of legitimacy, mantled in patronage, kinship networks and authoritarian governance, are increasingly contested by new forms of civic consciousness, technological activism and demands for accountability. The emergence of a politically aware middle class has exposed the state's inability to adapt to changing societal expectations thereby resulting in a perceived legitimacy gap. Furthermore, the study highlights how social media and protest movements act as catalysts for renegotiating the political contract, often outside formal democratic structures. The integration of classical philosophical frameworks with empirical realities in Pakistan, the dissertation offers an insightful understanding of the contradictions and possibilities embedded in the country's evolving political fabric. It concludes by advocating for a reimagined social contract that is inclusive, responsive, and reflective of contemporary socio-political transformations. The research contributes to broader debates on postcolonial governance, legitimacy, and participatory democracy in transitional societies.

Introduction

Background and Context

Pakistan's socio-political landscape has evolved through a complex interplay of historical, institutional, and societal forces since independence in 1947. The initial post-independence phase (1947–1958) was dominated by state-building efforts, massive migration, and identity formation challenges. The influx of refugees and the absence of a stable political leadership gave rise to a centralized bureaucratic-military structure, laying the foundation for future civil-military imbalance (Jalal, 1995). From 1958 to 1971, military dominance under Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan further marginalized civilian authority, with growing tensions between regional autonomy and centralization culminating in the secession of East Pakistan in 1971.

The 1971–1988 period saw political experimentation under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who introduced populist and socialist reforms, followed by Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, which re-Islamized the polity and society. Between 1988 and 1999, Pakistan oscillated between democratic regimes led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, but these were marred by corruption, elite bargaining, and political instability (Waseem, 2006). The Musharraf era (1999–2008) reintroduced technocratic governance and emphasized economic liberalization, yet simultaneously curbed democratic expression. Since 2008, Pakistan has experienced a hybrid political system characterized by judicial activism, media liberalization, and controlled electoral politics indicative of democratic stagnation rather than consolidation (Adeel, 2021). The role of the state in this evolution has largely been defined by centralization, coercive capacity, and developmental ambitions often executed through elite alliances. Civil society, (refers to voluntary organizations and institutions outside government, promoting shared interests, democracy, accountability, and social cohesion peacefully) though vibrant in periods, remains fragmented consisting of NGOs, religious networks, labor unions, and professional bodies such as bar associations. Citizen engagement in politics has traditionally been shaped by patron-client relations and biradari-based loyalties, although recent trends show a rise in issue-based activism and youth mobilization (Shafqat, 2019). The theoretical lens of the social contract (which posits individuals consent to form governments, sacrificing some freedoms for protection, order, and mutual benefit) provides critical insights into this evolution. Hobbes' emphasis on authority to ensure order resonates with Pakistan's security-centric state structure. Locke's notion of individual rights and consent is reflected in growing public demands for transparency, justice, and electoral credibility. Rousseau's idea of the general (the collective desire of the people aimed at the common good and public interest in society) will be visible in youth-led political movements and the increasing assertiveness of civil society. However, the persistent gap between state obligations and citizen expectations signals a legitimacy crisis and disillusionment with democratic institutions (Akhtar, 2018).

Historical Overview of Social Contract in Pakistan

The social contract in Pakistan has evolved under the shadows of colonial legacies, authoritarian rule, and deeply entrenched traditional authority structures. At the core of the post-colonial state-society formation was the continuation of centralized bureaucratic governance inherited from British India. Rather than establishing participatory institutions, the Pakistani state adopted a top-down model that prioritized state control and elite interests. As Jalal (1995) notes, Pakistan's early leadership maintained colonial-era structures, thereby fostering a governance model marked by distrust of mass politics and civic autonomy. This framework facilitated the emergence of a bureaucratic-military oligarchy, particularly from the 1950s onward, which consolidated state power through centralized institutions and repressive controls. Siddiqi (2007) characterizes this phenomenon as the "military-industrial complex" that dominates economic and political spheres, marginalizing democratic participation and distorting the social contract by positioning the state as a paternalistic and coercive actor rather than a representative one. The oscillation between military and civilian regimes further complicated the evolution of the social contract. Military interventions in 1958, 1977, and 1999 reshaped political expectations through authoritarian populism, promising stability and reform while undermining institutional development (Rizvi, 2000). In these eras, the social contract became coercive, defined by limited civil liberties and an emphasis on national security over citizen welfare. Conversely, democratic interludes (1988–99, post-2008) offered formal electoral mechanisms but were often marred by elite capture, corruption, and dynastic politics. As Ahmed (2013) notes, political parties frequently functioned as vehicles for patronage rather than democratic responsiveness, further eroding public trust. Traditional authority structures have continued to mediate state-society relations. Feudal and biradari-based politics remain influential in rural areas, where landowning elites use kinship ties to mobilize support and

broker access to state resources (Shah, 2014). In regions like Balochistan, KP, and the former FATA, tribal leaders and ethnic patrons wield substantial power, often superseding formal state authority. Moreover, religious networks, especially madrasahs, operate as parallel structures that provide social services and ideological narratives, shaping citizen loyalties beyond state control (Fair, 2008). Together, these historical and structural factors have prevented the emergence of a participatory, inclusive social contract in Pakistan, fostering a fragmented polity where legitimacy is contested and citizenship unevenly experienced.

Social Change and the Political Landscape

Over the past two decades, Pakistan has witnessed profound social changes (refers to significant, lasting alterations in societal values, norms, institutions, or behaviors across groups, often driven by collective actions) that have altered its political landscape and challenged traditional authority structures. One of the most significant shifts is the process of urbanization (the increasing movement of people from rural areas to cities, leading to economic growth, infrastructure development, and societal change) and demographic transformation. With nearly 40% of the population now residing in urban centers, Pakistan's cities have become hotbeds of political activity and civic engagement (Haque, 2020). Rural-to-urban migration (the movement of people from countryside to cities, often driven by job opportunities, education, and amenities) has not only intensified pressures on urban infrastructure but has also given rise to new forms of identity rooted in urban citizenship and rights-based discourse (Ali, 2018). This transformation has reshaped how people interact with the state, no longer as passive recipients of patronage but as active claimants of services and accountability. Alongside urbanization is the rise of an educated and politically conscious middle class. The expansion of private schooling, university enrollments, and overseas education has fostered a new social stratum that challenges traditional patron-client networks. These individuals, often raised outside the confines of feudal hierarchies, exhibit aspirations for meritocracy, transparency, and policy-based governance (Siddiqi, 2019). However, their growing frustration with systemic corruption and exclusion from decision-making processes has also led to political cynicism and spontaneous protest mobilizations. Digital and technological transformations (refer to the integration of advanced technologies, reshaping industries, communication, governance, education, economy, and daily human interaction globally) have further accelerated these shifts. With over 124 million internet users and an expansive social media footprint, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have emerged as arenas for political contestation and dissent (Shah, 2021). These tools not only amplify marginalized voices but also enable the rapid formation of issue-based movements circumventing traditional media gatekeepers and party structures

Problem Statement

Pakistan's political institutions are increasingly misaligned with the evolving structure and expectations of its society. Despite notable social transformations including urbanization, increased literacy, and the rise of a digitally connected youth population the political system remains largely anchored in historical elite interests and outdated power hierarchies. This mismatch has created a growing disconnect between the state and its citizens, as institutions struggle to adapt to the demands of a more heterogeneous and participatory society. Historically, Pakistan's political architecture was shaped by colonial legacies that prioritized centralized control, patronage, and bureaucratic dominance. These institutions were designed to serve a narrow elite rather than a broad-based citizenry (Alavi, 1972; Talbot, 2009). As a result, modern Pakistan has witnessed the persistence of procedural democracy characterized by regular elections and formal constitutional mechanisms but lacks substantive democratic engagement that includes accountability, responsiveness, and civic inclusion (Cheema, Khan, & Myerson, 2010). The electorate, particularly among the youth and urban middle class,

expresses increasing frustration with this limited democratic experience. These segments demand issue-based politics, transparency, and institutional reform demands largely unmet by traditional political elites. The tensions in state-society relations have become evident in the rising frequency of civic protests, political movements, and social media-based mobilization. Movements like the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) early anti-status quo narrative, student protests for educational reform, and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) exemplify new forms of political expression that challenge traditional authority structures (Yousaf, 2020; Khan, 2019). These developments indicate a crisis of legitimacy for state institutions that are unable or unwilling to reform. Furthermore, trust in political institutions has eroded. Public dissatisfaction with governance, widespread corruption, and a lack of transparency have created accountability deficits. According to the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT, 2022), trust in key institutions such as the parliament, police, and political parties remains low, especially among younger demographics. This situation points to an urgent need to re-theorize Pakistan's social contract. The existing political order appears increasingly incapable of integrating new social realities into the governing framework. Without significant reforms that align institutional practices with changing social values and expectations, the legitimacy and stability of the political system may be further undermined.

Research Gap

While much scholarly literature on Pakistan's political development emphasizes institutional failure, elite dominance, and military intervention (Rashid, 2012; Siddiqa, 2007), there has been comparatively limited focus on how emerging social forces particularly an expanding educated middle class, youth mobilization, and digital activism are altering the foundational dynamics of state-society relations. Traditional analyses have often centered on macro-political variables such as regime type and civil-military relations, overlooking the granular transformations occurring within society that challenge the prevailing political order. Furthermore, the theoretical application of classical social contract thought rooted in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau has rarely been localized to Pakistan's unique post-colonial and socio-religious context. While Western political theory provides a conceptual foundation, its translation to societies with different historical trajectories and informal power structures remains under-theorized (Chatterjee, 2004). Particularly absent is a framework that integrates the impact of rapid digital transformation on political participation and legitimacy. In the context of Pakistan, where nearly 70% of the population is under 35 and over 120 million have access to mobile phones (PTA, 2023), the intersection of technology and political consciousness requires urgent scholarly attention. Moreover, existing literature often marginalizes voices from urban peripheries, youth collectives, and informal political spaces such as student unions, digital platforms, and local protest networks. These spheres are now central to political contestation and identity formation, demanding a reorientation of the research agenda toward more pluralistic and dynamic understandings of political engagement (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Research Aims and Significance

This research seeks to critically examine how contemporary socio-cultural and demographic transformations are reshaping the traditional social contract in Pakistan. In a society characterized by rapid urbanization, a growing and educated middle class, increased digital media penetration, and changing class dynamics, the longstanding assumptions of state-citizen relations are under strain. The primary objective is to investigate how these evolving realities are redefining the expectations citizens hold of the state, as well as how the state attempts to maintain its authority and legitimacy within a transitional democratic framework. The weakening of traditional structures such as kinship-based politics, feudal hierarchies, and rural patronage systems has opened up new spaces for political participation and contestation,

especially among previously marginalized groups. At the same time, digital media and social networking platforms are enabling alternative forms of political expression and mobilization, which often operate outside conventional institutional channels. These changes, while potentially empowering, also introduce uncertainties into the mechanisms of governance, trust, and accountability. The study aims to capture this complexity by focusing on how the social contract is being reinterpreted across various segments of society, particularly those whose experiences are often overlooked in mainstream political analysis. Ultimately, by mapping these shifts, the research not only contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of social contract theory within post-colonial hybrid democracies, but also offers policy-relevant insights into how governance structures can be made more inclusive, participatory, and adaptive to the needs of a diversifying and increasingly vocal citizenry in Pakistan.

Research Questions

- 1) How do social changes such as urbanization and demographic shifts affect the traditional social contract in Pakistan?
- 2) In what ways does the emergence of a politically aware, educated middle class challenge traditional authority structures and reshape political expectations?
- 3) How do these changes impact the overall political landscape of Pakistan in terms of governance quality, institutional legitimacy, and democratic participation?
- 4) How are shifting social norms, institutions, and values influencing the content, expectations, and resilience of the social contract?

Literature Review

Evolution of the Social Contract Concept in Political Theory

The social contract tradition constitutes a cornerstone of Western political thought, offering foundational explanations for the legitimacy of political authority and the rights of citizens. The early formulations of social contract theory emerged during the early modern period, as thinkers grappled with the problems of order, governance, and individual liberty amid the collapse of feudal structures. At its core, the social contract posits that political authority arises from an implicit or explicit agreement among individuals to form a society and establish governance mechanisms to protect their fundamental interests (Klosko, 2011). Thomas Hobbes (1651) offered one of the earliest systematic articulations of the social contract in *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that in the "state of nature," human life was characterized by perpetual fear and violence, famously describing it as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651/1996). To escape this anarchic condition, individuals collectively surrendered their rights to a sovereign authority, who maintained order and security. Hobbes emphasized absolute sovereignty as essential, arguing that even an oppressive ruler was preferable to the chaos of the natural state. His model, though ensuring security, left little room for dissent or participatory governance. John Locke (1689), by contrast, offered a more optimistic view of human nature and the social contract. In *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke posited that individuals possessed natural rights life, liberty, and property which the state was obligated to protect. Locke asserted that governmental authority derived from the consent of the governed, and that citizens had the right to overthrow governments that violated their rights (Locke, 1689/1988). Locke's theory laid the groundwork for liberal democratic thought and justified revolutions against tyranny, most notably influencing the American and French revolutions.

Social Change and Political Transformations: Global and South Asian Perspectives

Social change has long been a critical driver of political transformation, fundamentally reshaping state-society relations. Globally, major processes like industrialization, urbanization, and democratization have profoundly influenced political systems. Industrialization

accelerated economic growth but also catalyzed class divisions, pushing for broader political participation and the expansion of rights (Moore, 1966). Urbanization concentrated populations in cities, facilitating new forms of political mobilization and collective action. As Huntington (1968) argues, rapid urbanization without corresponding institutional development often leads to political instability. Democratization emerged partly as a response to these pressures, embedding notions of accountability, representation, and citizen empowerment within governance structures (Diamond, 1999). The rise of civil society organizations further challenged the monopolization of political power by elites, demanding more participatory and inclusive governance (Putnam, 1993). The renegotiation of political authority globally has seen the erosion of traditional hierarchies and the empowerment of new actors, especially youth and marginalized groups. In many countries, state legitimacy is increasingly tied to performance and responsiveness rather than traditional authority. Castells (2012) notes that in the information age, power is not solely in institutions but also in communication networks that mobilize public opinion and collective action.

Moreover, the rise of new social movements across South Asia reflects profound social changes. Movements like the Shahbag protests in Bangladesh, anti-corruption campaigns in India, and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan reveal how youth, middle classes, and marginalized communities are asserting their political agency. These movements challenge existing political hierarchies and demand inclusive governance, respect for human rights, and transparency (Jaffrelot, 2017). Identity politics based on ethnicity, religion, and language has also intensified, sometimes deepening social cleavages but also pushing for the recognition of diverse aspirations within the political framework. Critically, while social change has opened new avenues for political engagement in South Asia, it has also introduced new tensions. Democratization processes remain incomplete; entrenched elites adapt to and often co-opt emerging social forces. As Heller (2000) observes that the deepening of democracy requires not just institutional reform but the transformation of underlying social structures that sustain inequality.

Role of Technology, Social Media, and Youth Movements in Political Change

The digital revolution has dramatically reshaped the socio-political landscape in Pakistan, offering unprecedented spaces for political discourse, dissent, and mobilization. With mobile internet penetration reaching over 50% of the population (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023), social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have become critical venues for shaping political narratives and fostering civic engagement. Unlike traditional media, often subject to state control and censorship, digital platforms offer a relatively decentralized arena where citizens, especially youth, can express grievances, organize protests, and challenge hegemonic discourses (Khan & Hussain, 2020). The centrality of youth in this transformation cannot be overstated. Pakistan's demographic dividend, with over 60% of its population under the age of 30 (UNDP, 2020), positions young people as key political actors. Movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), Aurat March, and resurgent student activism have utilized social media as organizational backbones, enabling rapid information dissemination, mass mobilization, and agenda-setting beyond traditional political structures (Yousaf, 2019). These movements reflect a shift from identity-based or ethnic politics toward rights-based claims centered on justice, equality, and participatory governance. Additionally, Social media's role in bypassing traditional gatekeepers has contributed to the emergence of a participatory political culture. Citizens no longer rely exclusively on political parties or mainstream media for political engagement; instead, digital activism has facilitated the growth of "networked publics" (boyd, 2010), wherein collective identities and action are forged through decentralized, often leaderless movements. This phenomenon reflects Manuel Castells' (2012) notion of "communication power," where power

relations are increasingly defined by control over information flows rather than traditional institutional authority.

Identified Research Gaps

The preceding literature has provided a comprehensive historical and contemporary overview of state-society relations in Pakistan, highlighting the critical role of military dominance, political fragmentation, and shifting societal expectations in shaping the nation's social contract. It is clear that the evolving relationship between the state and its citizens is not only a product of Pakistan's colonial history and authoritarian regimes but is also deeply influenced by the socio-economic transformations occurring within society, especially the rise of a more educated and politically active middle class. Furthermore, the growing significance of social media as a tool for political mobilization signals a fundamental shift in the way political legitimacy is constructed, challenging traditional state authority and institutions. This review also identifies key gaps in the existing literature, particularly the lack of focus on the middle class's role in renegotiating the social contract, the underexplored potential of social media in altering political dynamics, and the insufficient integration of classical social contract theories with Pakistan's unique postcolonial reality. To address these gaps, the theoretical framework for this dissertation will draw upon classical social contract theories, particularly those of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, while integrating postcolonial perspectives that account for Pakistan's distinctive political, social, and historical contexts. These classical theories provide foundational concepts related to the legitimacy of the state, the nature of governance, and the social contract, but they require contextualization within the realities of postcolonial, militarized states like Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

Classical Theories of Social Contract

In Hobbes' seminal work *Leviathan* (1651), the social contract is founded on the necessity of a strong central authority to prevent the chaos and disorder of the "state of nature." According to Hobbes, without a supreme power to impose law and order, life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651). In this context, individuals surrender their personal freedoms in exchange for security, entrusting the sovereign with absolute power. Hobbes' theory is particularly relevant to Pakistan's security-driven governance narratives. Pakistan, since its inception, has faced significant political instability, military coups, and security challenges. The state's emphasis on strong central authority often in the form of military rule resonates with Hobbes' argument that a powerful state is necessary to maintain order and ensure stability. Scholars argue that this Hobbesian approach has justified Pakistan's authoritarian regimes, where the state often prioritizes security over civil liberties (Siddiq, 2017). However, this centralization also stifles political freedoms, creating a paradox where the state's legitimacy becomes linked not to democracy but to security and survival (Fair, 2018). Rousseau's vision of the social contract, as outlined in *The Social Contract* (1762), emphasizes collective sovereignty and the role of civic participation in shaping political authority. Rousseau's concept of the "general will" is rooted in the idea that political authority must reflect the collective interest of the people, and the legitimacy of the state comes from the active participation of its citizens (Rousseau, 1762). Rousseau's ideal is a participatory democracy where individuals actively contribute to the formation of laws and policies. Rousseau's theory holds significant relevance to contemporary Pakistan, especially in the context of youth-led social movements and demands for greater civic engagement. The rise of movements like the Aurat March and Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) are examples of how marginalized groups in Pakistan are actively reshaping the political landscape and seeking more inclusive governance (Khan & Rehman, 2021). Rousseau's theory highlights the

importance of participatory governance models, which challenge top-down authoritarianism and advocate for policies that address the collective needs of society rather than elite interests. This aligns with the increasing demand for a government that is more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens, not just the elite.

Contemporary and Postcolonial Perspectives on State-Society Relations

Postcolonial state theory critically examines the legacies of colonialism and their ongoing impact on state-society relations in post-independence nations like Pakistan. The most significant consequence of colonial rule is the creation of weak, fragmented state institutions that were designed primarily to serve the colonial rulers rather than the local population. As Chatterjee (1993) argues, the colonial state was not oriented towards the development of a nation but rather to maintain control and extract resources. This legacy has resulted in state institutions that are often disconnected from the needs and aspirations of the populace, leaving them vulnerable to crisis and instability. Pakistan's state formation process, as defined by Beverley (1996), was similarly truncated, as it was created without the deep-rooted social and political structures that usually accompany a nation-formation process. In contrast to the seamless integration of statehood with nationhood seen in European contexts, postcolonial states like Pakistan often struggle with an identity crisis. This identity crisis is perpetuated by ethnic and sectarian divisions, as well as regional disparities. The result is that the postcolonial state is not a singular, cohesive entity but rather a collection of competing interests, with varying allegiances to the central government (Beverley, 1996). The colonial state's authoritarian traditions and emphasis on central control over diverse regions have also distorted the social contract in Pakistan. According to Barkawi and Laffey (2006), colonialism built the state with an outward-facing authority structure that largely ignored the social contract's traditional democratic principles. The social contract, therefore, became less about mutual obligations between the state and its citizens, and more about the subjugation of the populace to a central, often unaccountable, power. Globalization plays a significant role in shaping the state-society dynamics in postcolonial nations. As Robertson (1992) asserts, globalization brings external pressures that reshape domestic political landscapes, often in ways that exacerbate existing inequalities. Pakistan, like many postcolonial states, faces external pressures in the form of global norms, such as the promotion of democracy, human rights, and neoliberal economic policies. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, has frequently intervened in Pakistan's economy, dictating austerity measures and structural reforms that prioritize market liberalization over social welfare (Naqvi, 2012). These external pressures often serve to undermine the autonomy of the state, which must balance internal challenges with external demands, leading to a weakened social contract. Furthermore, globalization has led to a growing disillusionment among the Pakistani populace. Appadurai (1996) argues that globalization is both a source of economic opportunity and political alienation, as citizens increasingly feel that their governments are more responsive to global rather than local needs. This has contributed to the growing political and social fragmentation in Pakistan, where the state finds it increasingly difficult to maintain control over diverse groups with competing interests.

Relevance and Application of Theoretical Models to the Pakistani Context

The social contract, as conceptualized by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, offers important insights into state-society relations in Pakistan. Thomas Hobbes (1651) argues that the state exists to ensure security and order, with individuals relinquishing certain freedoms in exchange for protection (Hobbes, 1651). In Pakistan, this theoretical framework resonates with the state's strong security apparatus and authoritarian tendencies, especially during military regimes. The military's role in governance, often justified by national security concerns, aligns with Hobbesian notions of a powerful, centralized authority that prioritizes stability over individual

rights. However, Pakistan's inconsistent security situation, including internal conflicts, insurgencies, and militancy, often challenges this Hobbesian model, demonstrating the limits of state authority in maintaining order. Moreover, John Locke (1689), conversely, offers a theory of governance based on the protection of natural rights life, liberty, and property suggesting that political authority is legitimate only when it arises from the consent of the governed (Locke, 1689). This resonates with the aspirations of Pakistan's educated middle class and youth, who demand accountable governance and greater political participation. As Pakistan grapples with governance challenges, corruption, and weak institutional checks, Locke's emphasis on rights-based legitimacy remains pertinent. However, the political culture in Pakistan often deviates from Locke's idealized notion of consent, with elites frequently consolidating power without broad-based popular support, indicating the gaps in Locke's application to a postcolonial state like Pakistan. Furthermore, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) argues that the social contract is an agreement to form a collective will, where citizens act in the interest of the common good (Rousseau, 1762). Rousseau's notion of participatory democracy is critical in understanding the rise of youth movements, such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) youth wing and civil society activism, which demand greater civic engagement and accountability from the state. Despite these movements, Pakistan's political reality often fails to accommodate direct democracy or popular sovereignty, as political elites and military powers often marginalize grassroots efforts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the intricate and multifaceted impacts of social change on the political landscape in Pakistan, specifically focusing on the dilution of the traditional social contract. The selection of a qualitative design is rooted in the need to understand subjective meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences that shape the dynamic state-society relationship. As the nature of this inquiry is exploratory and interpretive, it aims to capture the depth and complexity of perceptions, social processes, and evolving political consciousness within the Pakistani context phenomena not easily quantifiable through numeric indicators. Moreover, a qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for this study due to its emphasis on context-specific understanding and its flexibility in dealing with emerging themes. Unlike quantitative methods, which often seek to measure pre-established variables, qualitative research allows for inductive reasoning where theories can emerge from the data itself. This is essential in a sociopolitical environment like Pakistan's, where political affiliations, cultural traditions, class structures, and regional dynamics converge in diverse and unpredictable ways. The nuanced and evolving nature of political behavior in Pakistan particularly among youth, urban populations, and the emerging middle class requires an approach capable of revealing hidden patterns and meanings. Additionally, the epistemological underpinning of this research lies in Interpretivism. Interpretivism, unlike positivism, emphasizes the constructed nature of social reality and the importance of understanding the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their actions and experiences. In the context of this study, interpretivism allows for a closer examination of how individuals perceive the state, their roles as citizens, and the legitimacy of political institutions. It also facilitates the investigation of how collective experiences such as urbanization, educational attainment, and exposure to digital media shape new forms of political engagement and contestation. Similarly, Interpretivist inquiry is particularly relevant for examining transformations in the social contract, which is itself a normative and conceptual construct, grounded in mutual expectations between the state and society. By applying this epistemological stance, the research aims to understand how ordinary citizens, particularly youth and educated segments, interpret shifts in governance, authority,

and citizenship. Through narratives, discourses, and dialogues, the study seeks to uncover the emerging contours of political identity and belonging in contemporary Pakistan.

Data Collection Methods

To address the research questions with depth and contextual richness, this study employs a triangulated approach incorporating three core qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. The rationale behind using these three methods is rooted in their complementary strengths: interviews allow for in-depth individual narratives, FGDs provide insights into group-level dynamics and shared meanings, and document analysis offers historical and discursive grounding. Together, these methods ensure a comprehensive understanding of how social change is reshaping the social contract and political landscape in Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews constitute the primary mode of data collection in this research. This method combines the structure of pre-formulated questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes, thereby allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the complexities of participant experiences. This format is particularly effective for eliciting nuanced perspectives on political engagement, perceived legitimacy of the state, evolving civic identities, and the impact of socio-cultural shifts on political consciousness. The target population for these interviews includes three critical stakeholder groups. First, university students particularly those enrolled in Political Science, Sociology, or related disciplines are selected due to their positioning at the intersection of traditional societal norms and modern educational exposure. As representatives of the burgeoning educated middle class, they offer valuable insights into generational changes in political behavior and expectations from the state. Second, academic experts and faculty members from relevant disciplines are interviewed for their theoretical perspectives and empirical insights into socio-political change. Their scholarly engagement with state theory, governance, and development provides analytical depth to the study. Third, student union representatives and grassroots political activists are included to capture the lived realities of political mobilization, contestation, and civic dissent. These actors often engage directly with the state apparatus and therefore provide firsthand reflections on issues of representation, accountability, and legitimacy. The proposed number of interviews is between 8 and 12, ensuring a manageable yet sufficiently diverse sample. Participants will be drawn from multiple cities and educational institutions to enhance representativeness. Interviews will be conducted in English, Urdu, or a hybrid of both, depending on the linguistic comfort of the respondent. With prior informed consent, interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to uncover recurring patterns, divergences, and emerging narratives relevant to the research objectives.

Moreover, to supplement the insights obtained through individual interviews, the research also employs focus group discussions with university and college-level youth. FGDs are uniquely suited to exploring collective meaning-making processes, shared political discourses, and the ways in which young people negotiate political identities in peer settings. By facilitating structured group conversations, FGDs capture the dialogical, contested, and sometimes contradictory views held by young citizens regarding politics, governance, and societal transformation. The study plans to conduct two to three FGDs, each comprising 6 to 8 participants. Efforts will be made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, academic discipline, class background, and political affiliation. Participants will be selected based on their expressed interest or involvement in political discussions, civic activities, or student governance. The FGDs will be moderated using a discussion guide but will allow for open-ended exchanges to promote spontaneous interaction. Topics will include perceptions of political legitimacy, experiences of inclusion or marginalization, attitudes toward traditional authority, and the impact of socio-technological change (e.g. digital media, urbanization) on youth political behavior. The third methodological pillar of the study is document analysis, which serves to

contextualize and triangulate the primary data collected through interviews and FGDs. This method involves the systematic examination of secondary sources including academic literature, media content, civil society reports, and government publications to uncover dominant discourses, historical continuities, and institutional narratives that inform the evolving social contract in Pakistan. A range of documents will be consulted. Peer-reviewed journal articles in fields such as political sociology, South Asian studies, and development theory will provide theoretical anchoring. Books addressing state formation, postcolonial governance, political Islam, and class structures in Pakistan will enrich the historical and conceptual framework. Policy papers and research reports from NGOs, think tanks, and international organizations (e.g. PILDAT, ICG, UNDP) will be used to assess how institutional actors frame issues of governance, political participation, and democratic reform. Finally, media archives from leading Pakistani newspapers such as Dawn, The News, Express Tribune, and The Nation will be reviewed to trace public discourses, editorial framing, and representations of state-citizen dynamics. The purpose of document analysis in this study is twofold. First, it provides a macro-level backdrop against which micro-level participant narratives can be situated, allowing for a richer understanding of the structural forces at play. Second, it enables the identification of discursive tensions between official narratives and counter-narratives, between tradition and modernity, and between institutional policy and citizen demand that are central to theorizing the dilution of the social contract in the Pakistani context. In this way, combined these three data collection strategies ensure that the study does not rely solely on either individual opinion or textual interpretation but instead draws on a triangulated corpus of qualitative data. This methodological design enhances the study's credibility, depth, and capacity to meaningfully engage with the complex and evolving relationship between social change and political transformation in Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The data generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) is analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that facilitates the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within textual data. Therefore, to enhance analytical rigor, the study adopts methodological triangulation by cross-validating data from interviews, FGDs, and documentary sources.

Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the findings derived from qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students, academics, activists, and student union members. The purpose is to explore how ongoing social changes are reshaping the political landscape and challenging the traditional social contract in Pakistan. Moreover, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, shared experiences, and emerging narratives. Rather than relying on pre-set categories, themes were developed inductively based on participants' perspectives, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in lived realities. The chapter is organized around eight core themes, including the erosion of the traditional social contract, rising political awareness among youth and the middle class, the impact of digital media, and growing demands for inclusivity and accountability. These themes collectively reveal the complex ways in which citizens are re-evaluating their relationship with the state amid shifting social and political dynamics.

Erosion of the Traditional Social Contract

A recurring narrative among participants was the perceived breakdown of the traditional social contract in Pakistan. Historically, the state's legitimacy has been premised on its providing essential services such as security, justice, and welfare in exchange for the compliance and

loyalty of its citizens (Locke, 1689/1988). However, the findings indicate that this foundational expectation is increasingly unmet, leading to widespread disenchantment and withdrawal of civic trust. Many respondents emphasized that the state is largely invisible in everyday life, surfacing only during electoral cycles. One student from Lahore summarized this sentiment: “The state is absent unless it wants votes.” This aligns with Akhtar (2018), who argues that Pakistan’s political system often operates as a “crisis state,” reactive rather than proactive in addressing public needs. Similarly, Zaidi (2005) notes that essential services in Pakistan have been progressively privatized, pushing marginalized citizens out of access to justice, healthcare, and quality education. The erosion of public trust in state institutions is not merely anecdotal; it reflects a deeper legitimacy crisis. According to Migdal (2001), when state institutions fail to deliver core functions, citizens turn to informal or parallel structures for survival and justice, thereby weakening the state's normative authority. In Pakistan, this has translated into a shift toward political apathy, grassroots mobilizations, or in some cases, radical rejection of formal politics. The disintegration of the traditional social contract signals more than administrative failure it reflects a systemic disconnect between the governed and governing. This evolving perception challenges the classical social contract models of Hobbes and Rousseau, requiring a reimagining of state-citizen relationships in Pakistan’s contemporary sociopolitical context.

Political Awakening of the Educated Middle Class and Youth

The rise of the educated middle class and politically conscious youth in Pakistan represents a key turning point in the nation's political landscape. Influenced by access to higher education, exposure to global discourses, and increased digital literacy, this group exhibits a marked departure from the political behavior of previous generations. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the younger population is no longer satisfied with slogans or charisma; they seek substantive outcomes rooted in merit and efficiency. As one student union member from Islamabad noted, “We want policy, representation, and results—not just slogans.” This reflects what Lall (2014) describes as a shift toward “critical citizenship,” where youth challenge inherited political loyalties and evaluate governance based on policy delivery and institutional performance. The educated youth increasingly reject dynastic politics and identity-based affiliations, preferring data-driven evaluation and issue-based alignment. This mirrors global trends, where educated classes embrace analytical and cosmopolitan perspectives on governance (Norris, 2002).

Digital Media as a Political Catalyst

Social media has become a central arena for political learning, mobilization, and discourse among Pakistani youth. Many interviewees described digital platforms as spaces where they encounter alternative political narratives and engage in political discussions that are otherwise censored or marginalized in mainstream media. A student activist from Karachi aptly referred to these platforms as “our political classroom.” Research supports these claims; Iqbal, Hussain, and Iqbal (2022) found that social media significantly increases political participation and efficacy among youth in Pakistan. Online platforms allow for the dissemination of dissenting opinions, exposure of corruption, and formation of discourse communities. However, respondents also expressed concerns about misinformation, polarization, and the lack of political education, which can leave youth vulnerable to manipulation. Haroon et al. (2021) warn that unregulated digital spaces in Pakistan often serve as echo chambers, intensifying partisan biases and emotional responses rather than fostering deliberative democracy. Despite these challenges, digital media remains a powerful force for democratization and political awakening.

Crisis of Accountability and Institutional Legitimacy

A dominant theme across interviews is the crisis of accountability and a perceived erosion of institutional legitimacy in Pakistan. Participants described a systemic failure in upholding justice and transparency, particularly when political accountability appears selective and biased. “Accountability is only used against political opponents. It’s not systemic,” remarked a political science faculty member, echoing widespread public sentiment. This observation aligns with Lall’s (2014) study on youth disenchantment with elite-dominated politics, where young people perceive the state as complicit in maintaining a status quo that benefits a narrow ruling class. Jawed, Lodhi, and Salim (2023) argue that the institutional landscape in Pakistan is marked by elite impunity and a lack of credible accountability mechanisms, which not only disempower citizens but also delegitimize the state’s claim to democratic governance. The resultant legitimacy deficit contributes to political cynicism, weakening the link between state and society and deepening the social contract crisis.

Reimagining the Social Contract

Despite their frustrations, many participants expressed a desire to reimagine the social contract in ways that reflect justice, inclusion, and participatory governance. This vision includes universal access to rights such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunity, as well as mechanisms to ensure fair political representation for women, minorities, and youth. “An inclusive contract would mean universal access to rights regardless of class or gender,” stated a civil society activist from Multan. These aspirations reflect global discourses on equitable governance and resonate with what Bimber (2001) calls “responsive statecraft” where governments are not only accountable but actively responsive to the needs of diverse constituencies. The idea of a reimagined contract also involves the decentralization of authority through local governments and the promotion of citizen-oriented bureaucratic structures. In Pakistan, where centralization has often led to inefficiency and alienation, such reforms could reinvigorate democratic participation and rebuild public trust in institutions.

Barriers to Political Participation

While youth are politically aware and engaged through informal channels, formal political participation remains constrained by several structural and cultural barriers. Respondents frequently cited the lack of entry points in political parties, the dominance of patronage systems, bureaucratic red tape, and even fears of surveillance as obstacles to their participation. A youth activist from Rawalpindi noted, “Parties only offer space if you have connections. Otherwise, you’re a volunteer forever.” These barriers discourage sustained political engagement and perpetuate the elitism that defines Pakistan’s political architecture. Jawed et al. (2023) argue that young people are systematically excluded from political processes, not due to apathy, but because the political system fails to accommodate their aspirations. This disconnect between youth agency and institutional openness underscores the need for structural reforms in party recruitment, political mentoring, and the establishment of youth-targeted policy frameworks. Without such reforms, the political energy of this demographic risks being dissipated or redirected into less constructive forms of activism.

Generational Shifts in Political Culture

A striking finding of this research is the generational divergence in political attitudes and behaviors. Younger participants were found to prioritize performance, transparency, and accountability over familial or ethnic loyalties. “We don’t vote like our parents. We ask what they’ve delivered first,” commented a student from Faisalabad. This perspective highlights a broader cultural transformation wherein political legitimacy is increasingly evaluated on the basis of merit and service delivery. Older generations, by contrast, often maintain party

affiliations rooted in identity, nostalgia, or communal belonging. Lall (2014) describes this as a shift from “traditional to rational-legal authority,” a signifier of political modernization. The intergenerational tensions reported by participants are observable in domestic, academic, and workplace settings, indicating a deepening cultural and ideological shift. As this new political culture matures, it may help foster more participatory and deliberative democratic practices, provided that institutional frameworks evolve accordingly.

The Role of Student Unions and Campus Politics

Student unions have historically played a critical role in shaping political consciousness and leadership in Pakistan, a role that participants widely acknowledged. However, many lamented the decline of student unions due to state suppression and the DE politicization of campuses. “Student unions raise real issues like fee hikes and harassment that no one else talks about,” said a campus organizer from Peshawar. This observation is supported by Asma and Rauf (2023), who found that the revival of student unions is essential for fostering civic engagement and democratic values among youth. Student organizations like the Progressive Students Collective have recently emerged as important actors, campaigning for university reforms and democratic rights (Raza, 2022). The absence of structured platforms for student participation leaves a vacuum in leadership development and weakens democratic resilience at its roots. Reviving and reforming student unions with inclusive and transparent mandates could restore their status as incubators for the next generation of political leaders. Therefore, the analysis presented in this chapter reveals a profound and growing rupture between the state and society in Pakistan, as articulated by youth, students, and emerging middle-class actors. While participants demonstrate an acute awareness of political injustices and institutional failures, their narratives also reflect a deeper crisis one of legitimacy, voice, and belonging. The traditional social contract, premised on hierarchical authority and minimal citizen participation, is no longer tenable in the face of expanding political consciousness and technological access. Yet, the aspirations for reform are repeatedly constrained by entrenched power structures, elite capture, and tokenistic engagement. Digital activism and student discourse offer potential avenues for transformation, but they operate within an ecosystem that is often resistant, surveilled, or co-opted. This disjuncture signals not just a moment of transition, but a confrontation between an old order clinging to relevance and an emergent political imagination demanding systemic recalibration. Whether this reimagining materializes remains deeply contested.

Discussion

Impact of Social Change on the Social Contract

The social contract in Pakistan is undergoing profound transformations in response to shifting socio-demographic dynamics. Urbanization, the rise of a politically conscious educated middle class, and the erosion of traditional authority structures are reshaping the relationship between the state and its citizens. These developments have not only altered patterns of governance but have also challenged longstanding bases of legitimacy and representation. Pakistan has seen a sharp rise in urbanization over the last few decades, with the urban population increasing from 32% in 1998 to over 38% in 2023 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This demographic shift has led to the expansion of urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, where diverse ethnic, linguistic, and economic groups converge. Internal migration from rural areas has resulted in the proliferation of informal settlements and the emergence of hybrid urban-rural identities. These hybrid identities blur the boundaries of traditional political affiliations and demand more inclusive, participatory models of governance. Gazdar and Mallah (2013) highlight how urbanization has created new spaces of informal negotiation between the state and marginalized groups, compelling the state to engage with evolving social configurations in unpredictable ways. Simultaneously, the power of traditional authority structures is waning.

The historical influence of feudal landlords and tribal elites has diminished significantly, due in part to local government reforms, judicial activism, and the rise of independent media (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). These changes have undermined patron-client networks that once ensured political loyalty through material dependence and kinship bonds. The political landscape, particularly in urban constituencies, has become more fluid and competitive. Decentralization initiatives have enabled new actors to emerge on the basis of civic legitimacy rather than hereditary privilege, further fragmenting the traditional vote banks. Consequently, political loyalties are undergoing realignment. Ethnic, tribal, and biradari-based allegiances are increasingly giving way to affiliations based on class, ideology, and generational identity. Movements like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have strategically capitalized on this shift, presenting a hybrid narrative rooted in anti-corruption, Islamic morality, and youth empowerment (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2022). This has created new standards for political legitimacy, wherein performance and accountability are prioritized over inherited status or parochial ties. The emergence of these alternative narratives reflects a broader contestation of the postcolonial state's claims to authority and signals the need for a reimagined social contract grounded in contemporary socio-political realities.

Transformations in the Political Landscape

Pakistan's political landscape has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, shaped by the growing influence of social change, civic expectations, digital technologies, and emerging non-traditional political actors. A key tension emerges from the institutional lag in governance structures that have failed to keep pace with a rapidly evolving society. Public sector inefficiencies, endemic corruption, and the lack of meaningful reform in service delivery mechanisms have collectively led to a weakened relationship between state and society. Hussain (2023) highlights that these systemic failures have severely eroded public trust, noting that the state's inability to deliver basic services consistently undermines its legitimacy. Klitgaard (2013) also asserts that corruption not only distorts public sector performance but also reinforces a culture of cynicism and disengagement among citizens. These governance shortcomings are compounded by limited representation and accountability mechanisms, creating a gap between what citizens expect from their political institutions and what they actually receive (Yousaf et al., 2016). This gap reflects a broader disconnect between institutional stagnation and societal dynamism. While Pakistan's educated middle class and youth population increasingly advocate for merit-based, transparent, and responsive governance, state institutions have remained largely rigid. Bureaucratic cultures rooted in colonial legacies continue to resist decentralization and innovation. Scholars such as Cheema (2008) and Weiss (2007) argue that centralization remains a persistent feature of Pakistan's political system, even in the face of demands for grassroots empowerment and participatory governance. The legal and procedural frameworks that guide state functions often inhibit, rather than facilitate, political innovation, frustrating efforts to reform institutions in line with emerging social realities. Digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, have become central to these transformations. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok now serve as critical arenas for political debate, mobilization, and information dissemination. Batool et al. (2020) found that online political engagement significantly enhances civic awareness among Pakistani youth, while Khan et al. (2022) report strong correlations between digital activism and offline participation. Social media has enabled marginalized voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers, allowing rapid mobilization around emergent issues. Yet, this digital mobilization comes with risks. Haroon et al. (2021) demonstrate that misinformation often propagated through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages can manipulate public opinion, especially in low-literacy contexts. Kausar et al. (2021) similarly point to the strategic use of bots and coordinated campaigns to manipulate Twitter trends, distorting political narratives and polarizing public discourse. The influence of social media extends into electoral politics

and public opinion formation. Recent elections have shown that digital campaigns can significantly shape voter perceptions, especially among urban and first-time voters. According to a 2025 PSSR study, political exposure through social media has a measurable impact on voting behavior, candidate image, and issue salience. Historical cases such as PTI's 2013 and 2018 campaigns demonstrate the efficacy of digital outreach, including micro-targeting and AI-driven messaging. However, the downside of such digital penetration is the rise of echo chambers and disinformation, which undermine informed deliberation and complicate democratic choice. Scholars warn that while digital tools can enhance transparency and civic engagement, they also pose challenges to political cohesion by reinforcing ideological silos and reducing the space for reasoned debate.

In sum, the transformation of Pakistan's political landscape is marked by an expanding gap between institutional rigidity and societal dynamism. As formal institutions falter in delivering governance and representation, citizens increasingly turn to informal networks, digital platforms, and protest movements to express political agency. This shift from patronage-based politics to issue-oriented activism signals a redefinition of the social contract. However, the lack of institutional adaptation and the prevalence of elite capture raise questions about the sustainability of these changes. Without substantive reforms to enhance responsiveness, accountability, and participatory governance, the emergent energies of civil society risk being dissipated or repressed. The evolving political discourse—both online and offline—thus remains a site of contestation, reflecting broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and the future trajectory of the Pakistani state.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how rapid social transformations are reshaping the foundations of the social contract in Pakistan and altering the political landscape. Drawing upon qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the research critically examined how urbanization, demographic shifts, the rise of an educated middle class, and the erosion of traditional authority structures have collectively challenged the prevailing norms of governance, legitimacy, and state-society relations. The findings reveal that Pakistan's traditional social contract historically shaped by patron-client dynamics, tribal loyalties, and feudal authority is under increasing strain. The emergence of a politically conscious, urban middle class, coupled with widespread digital literacy, has led to greater civic awareness and demands for transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. Social media has amplified these demands, enabling new forms of political mobilization and discourse that circumvent traditional gatekeepers. However, these shifts have not been matched by institutional reforms, leading to a growing disillusionment with formal political processes and a legitimacy crisis for the state.

Recommendation

Future research could employ mixed methods or longitudinal approaches to track evolving perceptions of the social contract over time. Comparative studies with other postcolonial states may also yield valuable insights into how similar transformations are negotiated across different political systems. Ultimately, this dissertation affirms that the social contract in Pakistan is not dissolving it is being renegotiated. The state's ability to respond to this negotiation will define the trajectory of its democratic future.

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