



The Struggle for Democracy in Pakistan (1988–1999): Causes of Failure

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Abstract

This article examines the tumultuous decade of Pakistani democracy (1988–1999), during which four elected governments, two each led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were prematurely dismissed, revealing systemic weaknesses in democratic governance. The study identifies key factors behind this instability, including the misuse of the Eighth Amendment that enabled presidential overreach to dissolve governments, persistent military interference in civilian affairs, corruption, and the absence of a democratic culture. The analysis highlights how constitutional manipulations, institutional decay, and power struggles between civilian and military elites perpetuated a cycle of instability. The article concludes that sustainable democracy in Pakistan requires stronger institutions, reduced military influence, and accountable leadership committed to democratic norms, without which the nation risks perpetual political fragility.

Keywords: Pakistan, Democracy, Military Intervention, Eighth Amendment, Political Instability, Governance, Corruption

Introduction

The democratic journey of Pakistan has been fraught with interruptions, political instability, and a persistent imbalance between civilian and military institutions. After General Zia-ul-Haq died in 1988, Pakistan seemed poised for a democratic revival, but the transition proved complex and fragile. The period between 1988 and 1999 witnessed frequent government dissolutions, allegations of corruption, political vendettas, and an ever-present influence of the military establishment on civilian authority (Khan, 2018; Jalal, 1995). Although successive governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif sought to strengthen parliamentary democracy, their efforts were constrained by constitutional ambiguities, most notably Article 58(2)(b), which granted the president sweeping powers to dismiss elected governments (Hanif & Zahra, 2017). The resulting tug-of-war between civilian leaders, the presidency, and the military obstructed institutional consolidation and undermined democratic norms (Hassan, 2019). The post-Zia era was also characterized by an evolving constitutional struggle, where civilian governments attempted to assert parliamentary supremacy against entrenched bureaucratic and military power structures. The revival of democracy in 1988 was hailed as a significant milestone, yet the recurring political crises exposed the fragility of Pakistan's democratic foundations (Khan, F., Islam, & Rizvi, 2015). Frequent dismissals of elected assemblies under the Eighth Amendment and presidential authority reflected an ongoing institutional imbalance (Aziz, 2015; Cheema, 2024). Moreover, civil-military relations during this period shaped Pakistan's governance model, where the military's residual authority from the Zia era continued to dictate the boundaries of civilian rule (Haqqani, 2005; Rizvi, 2000).

These systemic limitations reflected deep-rooted structural flaws in Pakistan's political system, where governance remained susceptible to authoritarian impulses despite democratic façades (Siddiqa, 2007). Socioeconomic and administrative challenges further compounded Pakistan's democratic instability. The political leadership's inability to deliver on governance reforms, economic development, and public accountability weakened civilian legitimacy (Naseem & Khan, 2017). Additionally, an over-centralized civil service, politicized bureaucracy, and weak institutional mechanisms hindered the development of sustainable democratic governance (International Crisis Group, 2009). Scholars argue that the failure to institutionalize democracy during this period was not merely due to political rivalry but also to the absence of coherent democratic culture and leadership commitment to constitutionalism (Talbot, 2012; Qurat-ul-Ain, 1999). By 1999, Pakistan's democratic experiment collapsed once again under a military coup, signaling the end of a turbulent decade that exposed both the promise and perils of Pakistan's struggle for democratic continuity (*The Pakistan Development Review*, 1998).

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated the roots of Pakistan's democratic instability. Haqqani (2005) and Rizvi (2000) argue that Pakistan's civil–military imbalance is structural rooted in the military's self-perceived role as the guardian of national integrity. The military's direct and indirect interference, including manipulation of political alliances, has been a recurring obstacle to democratic consolidation (Siddiqa, 2007). According to Jalal (1995), Pakistan's democratic experience has been undermined by the persistence of colonial-era administrative legacies, where bureaucratic and military elites retain disproportionate power. Similarly, Khan (2018) highlights constitutional distortions—especially the Eighth Amendment—that empowered presidents like Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Farooq Leghari to dismiss elected governments at will. Hanif and Zahra (2017) emphasize that Article 58(2)(b) institutionalized presidential overreach, blurring the separation of powers. Empirical studies (Naseem & Khan, 2017; Qurat-ul-Ain, 1999) show that political instability between 1988 and 1999 negatively affected economic growth, deterring foreign investment and eroding public trust. Cheema (2024) further notes that weak parliamentary mechanisms, combined with dynastic politics, prevented the emergence of accountable leadership. Moreover, international policy analyses (International Crisis Group, 2009) point out that Pakistan's governance failures were compounded by a weak civil service, politicized bureaucracy, and lack of meritocracy. Hassan (2019) adds that the military's dominance was justified through a “guardian narrative,” positioning itself as a corrective institution in times of civilian failure. The cumulative findings of these studies (Aziz, 2015; Talbot, 2012) reveal that the repeated dismissal of governments during 1988–1999 was not merely the result of individual failings but of a broader systemic pattern of constitutional manipulation, institutional decay, and entrenched elite control.

Research Questions

1. What structural, constitutional, and political factors contributed to the repeated failure of democratic governments in Pakistan between 1988 and 1999?
2. How did the military's role and the misuse of constitutional powers affect the democratic process during this period?

Research Objectives

- To analyze the constitutional, political, and institutional weaknesses that undermined democracy in Pakistan (1988–1999).
- To evaluate the extent of military and bureaucratic influence in civilian politics.
- To identify pathways toward strengthening democratic governance in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study is based on secondary data analysis, utilizing historical accounts, scholarly articles, books, government reports, and policy analyses. The data were gathered

from academic databases and institutional sources such as the International Crisis Group, academic journals, and political histories by noted scholars (Haqqani, 2005; Jalal, 1995; Khan, 2018). Through interpretive analysis, the study critically examines the interactions among political institutions, military elites, and constitutional mechanisms that shaped democratic outcomes in Pakistan from 1988 to 1999.

Findings

The analysis indicates that one of the primary causes of democratic failure in Pakistan between 1988 and 1999 was the misuse of the Eighth Amendment, particularly Article 58(2)(b), which allowed the president to dissolve elected governments at will. The repeated dismissals of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif's governments exemplify how constitutional provisions, intended as checks and balances, were exploited to undermine parliamentary sovereignty (Hanif & Zahra, 2017; Aziz, 2015). The evidence shows that this misuse not only destabilized individual governments but also created a precedent for recurring executive overreach, weakening the democratic fabric and eroding public confidence in electoral processes (Cheema, 2024; Khan, 2018). Frequent exercise of these powers disrupted policy continuity and hindered institutional stability, leaving Pakistan's democracy highly vulnerable to political manipulation. The findings reveal that civil-military relations were a pivotal factor influencing Pakistan's democratic trajectory during this period. The military, having entrenched itself as a central political actor during the Zia era, continued to exert influence over national policy even under civilian governments (Haqqani, 2005; Rizvi, 2000). Intelligence agencies and senior generals manipulated political alliances and party strategies to safeguard military interests, constraining civilian authority (Hassan, 2019; Siddiq, 2007). It is observed that this persistent interference created a parallel power structure in which elected governments were compelled to negotiate with the military rather than exercise independent decision-making. Consequently, the military's de facto authority undermined democratic legitimacy and perpetuated recurring cycles of political instability. The analysis further demonstrates that weak political institutions and dynastic party structures contributed significantly to democratic failures. Major political parties such as the PPP and PML-N prioritized loyalty to leadership over democratic norms, with little internal democracy (Cheema, 2024; Jalal, 1995). Legislative defections and "horse-trading" frequently destabilized parliamentary coalitions (Khan, F., Islam, & Rizvi, 2015). The evidence shows that the absence of institutionalized opposition and strong party discipline prevented effective democratic mechanisms from functioning, making political disputes more likely to be resolved through executive intervention or military involvement rather than parliamentary negotiation or consensus-building (Talbot, 2012; Qurat-ul-Ain, 1999).

It is observed that corruption and governance failures significantly eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Both Bhutto and Sharif administrations faced widespread allegations of nepotism, financial mismanagement, and favoritism toward family-owned enterprises, undermining credibility and accountability (Naseem & Khan, 2017; Khan, 2018). The analysis indicates that these governance failures reinforced the military's justification for intervention, portraying itself as the guardian of national interest (Haqqani, 2005; Hassan, 2019). Economic mismanagement and ineffective policy implementation further weakened public confidence, contributing to the perception that democratic governments were incapable of addressing Pakistan's socio-economic challenges (The Pakistan Development Review, 1998).

The findings reveal that low public political awareness and entrenched social hierarchies reinforced democratic fragility. Voter turnout during national elections in this period averaged 30–40%, reflecting widespread disengagement and apathy (Talbot, 2012). Feudal influence and elite dominance limited meaningful political participation, while media restrictions curtailed public debate and accountability (Rizvi, 2000; Siddiq, 2007). The evidence shows that without a politically informed and active citizenry, democratic institutions remained superficial and vulnerable to manipulation by entrenched elites and the military. Collectively,

these insights indicate that Pakistan's democratic failures during 1988–1999 were the result of intertwined constitutional weaknesses, military interference, governance deficits, and socio-political constraints.

Discussion

The period from 1988 to 1999 demonstrates how constitutional arrangements can simultaneously enable governance and create vulnerabilities. Article 58(2)(b) of the Eighth Amendment granted the president the authority to dismiss elected governments, which was exercised repeatedly, undermining parliamentary continuity (Hanif & Zahra, 2017; Aziz, 2015). While some argue that the provision was a necessary safeguard in a politically unstable environment, the repeated dismissals of governments highlight how such powers were exploited, weakening democratic legitimacy and public confidence (Cheema, 2024; Khan, 2018). This shows that constitutional mechanisms, if misapplied, can exacerbate political fragility rather than ensure stability.

Civil-military relations played a decisive role in shaping Pakistan's democratic trajectory during this decade. The military, as an entrenched institution, continued to influence national policy and constrain civilian authority (Haqqani, 2005; Rizvi, 2000). At the same time, civilian governments often failed to strengthen their legitimacy or build resilient institutions, leaving space for military intervention (Hassan, 2019; Siddiq, 2007). This interaction between weak civilian structures and assertive military influence indicates that sustainable democracy requires both empowered institutions and accountable governance capable of resisting non-elected interference.

Political party dynamics further contributed to instability. The PPP and PML-N were characterized by centralized leadership and limited internal democracy (Cheema, 2024; Jalal, 1995). While strong leadership can provide cohesion, it often came at the expense of transparency and accountability, leading to defections and coalition fragility (Khan, F., Islam, & Rizvi, 2015; Talbot, 2012). These internal weaknesses compounded broader institutional vulnerabilities, reinforcing reliance on presidential authority or military backing to resolve political crises.

Corruption and governance failures were also central to democratic erosion. Allegations of nepotism, financial mismanagement, and favoritism during both Bhutto and Sharif administrations diminished public trust and provided justification for intervention by non-elected actors (Naseem & Khan, 2017; Khan, 2018). Economic mismanagement, lack of policy continuity, and ineffective institutions deepened citizens' perception that democratic governments were unable to address national challenges (Haqqani, 2005; Hassan, 2019). These factors highlight that democratic survival is closely linked to governance quality, accountability, and institutional integrity.

Finally, societal factors such as public political awareness and elite dominance influenced the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Low voter turnout and the continued influence of feudal elites limited meaningful citizen participation, reducing pressure on governments to perform (Talbot, 2012; Rizvi, 2000). Media restrictions further constrained the public's ability to hold leaders accountable (Siddiq, 2007). These observations suggest that democratic consolidation requires both empowered citizens and mechanisms that translate political engagement into institutional effectiveness.

Collectively, the evidence underscores that Pakistan's democratic failures during 1988–1999 were not the result of a single factor but rather the interplay of constitutional weaknesses, military influence, party dysfunction, governance deficits, and limited civic participation (Cheema, 2024; Jalal, 1995). Strengthening democracy in Pakistan requires addressing these interconnected elements, ensuring institutional resilience, promoting political accountability, and enhancing public engagement to prevent recurring cycles of instability (International Crisis Group, 2009; Talbot, 2012).

Conclusion

The decade from 1988 to 1999 underscores the fragility of Pakistan's democratic institutions and the persistent challenges to consolidating civilian governance. Frequent dismissals of elected governments, primarily under the constitutional provision of presidential authority, highlighted the vulnerability of parliamentary structures and the ease with which institutional mechanisms could be manipulated. This period demonstrated that democracy alone, without strong institutions and legal safeguards, is insufficient to ensure stability. Political infighting, weak party cohesion, and leadership focused on personal or dynastic interests further undermined the capacity of elected governments to govern effectively, creating recurring cycles of instability and public disillusionment with democratic processes.

Governance failures, including corruption, nepotism, and policy inefficiency, were closely intertwined with the broader structural weaknesses of the state. These failures eroded public trust in elected representatives and provided justification for intervention by non-elected actors, reinforcing the perception that democracy was incapable of delivering economic development or social justice. The lack of transparency, accountability, and merit-based decision-making not only weakened the effectiveness of governments but also amplified the influence of entrenched elites and military authorities, perpetuating a system where democratic authority remained subordinate to informal power structures. Consequently, the decade revealed that institutional weaknesses and leadership deficiencies were mutually reinforcing, preventing the consolidation of democratic norms.

Finally, the experience of 1988–1999 highlights that the survival and success of democracy depend on a holistic integration of institutional, political, and societal reforms. Stronger institutions capable of enforcing accountability, empowered political parties with transparent leadership structures, and active civic participation are essential components of sustainable democratic governance. Without simultaneous attention to structural reform, governance integrity, and public engagement, democratic frameworks remain superficial and vulnerable to repeated disruption. The lessons from this period indicate that building a resilient democracy requires long-term commitment to institutional strengthening, accountable leadership, and citizen empowerment, ensuring that civilian rule is both effective and respected across all levels of society.

Way Forward

Ensuring sustainable democracy in Pakistan requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that simultaneously addresses institutional, political, and societal challenges. Strengthening core institutions, including an independent judiciary, a professional civil service, and a transparent parliamentary system, is essential to uphold accountability, enforce the rule of law, and prevent the arbitrary use of constitutional powers. Civilian authority must be reinforced, reducing the influence of the military in political affairs and ensuring that elected governments can function independently and effectively. Political parties need to prioritize internal democracy, transparency, and merit-based leadership to build public trust, maintain cohesion, and reduce dependence on informal or extra-parliamentary support. At the same time, governance reforms must target corruption, nepotism, and policy inefficiency, creating mechanisms that ensure accountability, equitable resource allocation, and effective service delivery. Civic engagement and political awareness are equally critical, requiring investment in education, promotion of independent media, and avenues for meaningful public participation, so that citizens can actively influence governance and hold leaders accountable. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, robust institutions, empowered civilian authority, accountable leadership, and active citizenry, Pakistan can work toward a resilient democracy capable of withstanding political crises, military interventions, and governance challenges, ensuring that democratic governance becomes both stable and responsive to the needs of society.

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