

TURBULENCE AND TRANSITIONS: UNPACKING PAKISTAN'S FRAGILE DEMOCRACY (1988-1999)

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Abstract

This study critically examines the turbulent phase of Pakistan's democratic experience between 1988 and 1999, a period characterized by repeated civilian governments, presidential dissolutions of parliament, persistent civil-military tensions, judicial interventions, and chronic governance and economic crises. Drawing on a qualitative research design based on secondary data from peer-reviewed academic sources available on Google Scholar, the article explores why democratic transitions during this era failed to produce democratic consolidation. Anchored in theories of democratic transition, institutional imbalance, and civil-military relations, the study argues that democracy in Pakistan remained largely procedural rather than substantive, vulnerable to constitutional manipulation and extra-parliamentary influence. The analysis reveals that the concentration of power within the presidency and military establishment, the repeated use of Article 58(2)(b), weak and personalized political parties, politicized accountability mechanisms, and limited judicial independence collectively undermined civilian authority and institutional continuity. The findings further demonstrate that elite-driven politics and security-centric governance eroded public trust in democratic institutions and normalized political instability. By integrating constitutional, political, and institutional perspectives, the study contributes to existing scholarship on democratic fragility in post-colonial states and offers historically grounded insights into Pakistan's recurring democratic breakdowns.

INTRODUCTION

The restoration of electoral democracy in Pakistan in 1988, following the sudden death of General Zia-ul-Haq, marked a significant yet deeply contested moment in the country's political trajectory. After more than a decade of military authoritarianism, the return of civilian rule under the Pakistan Peoples Party generated optimism about constitutionalism, representative

governance, and democratic consolidation. However, this optimism was constrained by enduring structural legacies of centralized authority, weak parliamentary traditions, and entrenched non-elected institutions that had historically dominated the state apparatus (Jalal, 1995). As a result, democracy re-emerged in a political environment that was institutionally

hostile to civilian supremacy, rendering the transition fragile from its inception.

Between 1988 and 1999, Pakistan experienced an unprecedented cycle of political instability characterized by the repeated dismissal of elected governments, frequent changes in leadership, and persistent confrontation between state institutions. Four civilian governments—led alternately by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif—were removed before completing their constitutional terms, largely through presidential authority exercised under Article 58(2)(b) of the Eighth Amendment (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2022). These dismissals were routinely justified on grounds of corruption, misgovernance, and political deadlock, yet they reflected deeper power asymmetries within the state. The presidency, judiciary, and military collectively constrained parliamentary authority, preventing the emergence of stable and accountable democratic governance (Rizvi, 2000; Shah, 2014).

The period also revealed fundamental weaknesses within Pakistan's political parties and democratic culture. Rather than fostering institutional development and consensus-based politics, parties remained highly personalized, dynastic, and adversarial, often seeking support from non-democratic actors to dislodge rivals from power (Talbot, 2009). Governance failures, economic mismanagement, and declining public service delivery further eroded public confidence in democratic rule, reinforcing narratives that democracy was inherently unstable in Pakistan (Noman, 1990; Siddiq, 2007). Against this backdrop, the military coup of October 1999 did not emerge as an abrupt rupture but rather as the culmination of a decade-long process of democratic erosion. This study situates Pakistan's 1988–1999 experience within broader debates on democratic fragility and seeks to explain why repeated democratic transitions failed to yield democratic consolidation.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Pakistan's democratic instability emphasizes the historical roots of institutional imbalance and elite dominance. Jalal (1995) argues that Pakistan inherited a centralized

and authoritarian state structure that marginalized representative institutions from the outset. This structural legacy persisted into the post-1988 period, limiting the capacity of civilian governments to exercise autonomous authority. Similarly, Talbot (2009) highlights how weak party institutionalization and dynastic leadership undermined democratic norms and internal accountability.

A second strand of literature focuses on civil-military relations as the core obstacle to democratic consolidation. Rizvi (2000) and Shah (2014) contend that the military's self-perceived role as guardian of national stability justified its continued intervention in civilian politics, either directly or indirectly. Studies by Cheema and Siddiq (2010) further demonstrate how the military-bureaucratic complex maintained influence through control over security, foreign policy, and key economic sectors, thereby constraining civilian decision-making during the 1990s.

Other scholars examine constitutional and judicial dimensions of democratic fragility. Newberg (1995) and Waseem (2006) analyze the politicization of constitutional provisions, particularly Article 58(2)(b), and the selective role of the judiciary in legitimizing dismissals of elected governments. Economic mismanagement, corruption allegations, and governance failures are also highlighted as contributing factors (Noman, 1990; Siddiq, 2007). Collectively, these ten studies underscore that Pakistan's democratic breakdown was not the result of a single factor but rather an interaction of institutional, political, and structural constraints.

Additional scholarship further deepens understanding of Pakistan's democratic fragility. Waseem (2022) emphasizes the personalization of politics and the failure of political parties to institutionalize democratic norms, while Akhtar (2018) highlights structural civil-military imbalance as a persistent constraint on civilian supremacy. Ahmed (2013) links democratic breakdowns to governance deficits and elite capture, whereas Sayeed (1997) underscores the historical continuity of authoritarian tendencies within Pakistan's political culture. Cohen (2004)

situates Pakistan's democratic instability within broader strategic and security imperatives, and Fair (2014) demonstrates how security-centric governance has repeatedly marginalized democratic processes. These perspectives reinforce the argument that democratic fragility during 1988–1999 was systemic and deeply embedded in institutional power relations.

While existing studies provide valuable insights into specific dimensions of Pakistan's democratic instability, there is a lack of integrative analysis that holistically examines the interaction between constitutional mechanisms, civil–military relations, and political party behavior during the 1988–1999 period. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing these perspectives into a unified analytical framework that explains democratic fragility as a systemic outcome rather than isolated failures.

Research Questions

1. What institutional and political factors contributed to the fragility of democracy in Pakistan between 1988 and 1999?
2. How did civil–military relations shape democratic outcomes during this period?
3. Why did repeated democratic transitions fail to result in democratic consolidation?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the structural and institutional weaknesses of Pakistan's democratic system (1988–1999).
2. To examine the role of civil–military relations in undermining civilian governance.
3. To assess the implications of repeated political transitions for democratic consolidation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides a comprehensive and historically grounded analysis of Pakistan's fragile democratic experience during the critical period of 1988–1999, a phase that continues to shape the country's contemporary political dynamics. By systematically examining the interaction between constitutional design, civil–military relations, judicial behavior, and political party practices, the research moves

beyond leader-centric or event-based explanations and instead highlights the structural and institutional roots of democratic instability. The study contributes to the broader literature on democratic transition and consolidation in post-colonial and hybrid regimes by illustrating how formal democratic procedures can coexist with substantive authoritarian control. Moreover, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and democratic reform advocates by identifying enduring constraints on civilian supremacy and institutional balance in Pakistan. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for interpreting Pakistan's repeated democratic breakdowns but also for informing future reforms aimed at strengthening constitutionalism, political accountability, and democratic governance.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based exclusively on secondary sources retrieved from Google Scholar, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and authoritative reports. Using thematic and interpretive analysis, the research critically examines existing literature to identify patterns, contradictions, and explanatory frameworks related to democratic instability and civil–military relations in Pakistan.

Findings

- **Persistent Institutional Imbalance:** The findings indicate that throughout 1988–1999, Pakistan's democratic system suffered from a deep structural imbalance among state institutions. Elected civilian governments remained constitutionally and politically weaker than the presidency and the military establishment, which retained decisive influence over key domains such as national security, foreign policy, and internal stability. This imbalance prevented the development of effective civilian authority and policy autonomy, reinforcing a governance structure where democratic institutions operated under constant constraint (Rizvi, 2000; Shah, 2014). As a result, democratic governance

remained conditional and reversible rather than sovereign and stable.

- **Frequent Dismissal of Elected Governments:** A major finding of the study is the normalization of government dismissals through constitutional means, particularly the repeated invocation of Article 58(2)(b). Between 1988 and 1996, all elected governments were dismissed before completing their terms, creating a cycle of political uncertainty and institutional discontinuity. These dismissals undermined parliamentary sovereignty, disrupted policy continuity, and weakened democratic learning processes, as successive governments were unable to institutionalize reforms or establish long-term governance strategies (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2022).

- **Dominance of Civil-Military Relations:** The analysis reveals that civil-military relations remained the central determinant of democratic outcomes during this period. Although the military did not rule directly for most of the 1990s, it exercised significant indirect control by shaping political alignments, influencing leadership changes, and asserting veto power over critical policy areas. This entrenched the perception of the military as the ultimate arbiter of political stability, thereby limiting the authority and legitimacy of civilian institutions (Rizvi, 2000; Fair, 2014).

- **Weakness and Personalization of Political Parties:** The study finds that political parties failed to function as democratic institutions capable of mediating state-society relations. Party leadership was highly personalized and dynastic, internal party democracy was minimal, and political competition was largely confrontational rather than programmatic. Instead of strengthening parliamentary norms, parties frequently relied on extra-parliamentary actors, including the presidency and judiciary, to remove rival governments, thereby reinforcing non-democratic interventions (Talbot, 2009; Waseem, 2022).

- **Judicial Ambiguity and Selective Constitutionalism:** Another key finding is the judiciary's inconsistent role in protecting democratic continuity. While the courts occasionally asserted judicial independence, they

more often legitimized presidential dissolutions and political interventions, contributing to constitutional uncertainty. This selective constitutionalism weakened the rule of law and reinforced executive dominance over parliament, reducing public confidence in judicial impartiality (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2006).

- **Governance Failures and Economic Constraints:** The findings also highlight that governance failures, including corruption allegations, administrative inefficiency, and poor economic management, significantly eroded public trust in democratic governments. Structural adjustment pressures, rising inflation, and declining public service delivery during the 1990s reinforced perceptions that civilian rule was ineffective, indirectly strengthening arguments for non-democratic intervention (Noman, 1990; Siddiqua, 2007).

- **Erosion of Democratic Norms and Public Trust:** Finally, the study finds that repeated political crises normalized instability and weakened democratic norms among both elites and the public. Frequent government breakdowns fostered political cynicism, reduced electoral enthusiasm, and entrenched the belief that democracy was inherently fragile in Pakistan. This erosion of trust created a permissive environment for the military takeover of 1999, which was widely perceived as a response to systemic democratic failure rather than an abrupt rupture (Jalal, 1995; Cohen, 2004).

Discussion and Analysis

The democratic experience of Pakistan between 1988 and 1999 reflects a classic case of incomplete and reversible democratic transition, where electoral processes existed without the consolidation of democratic norms and civilian supremacy. Drawing on transition theory, this period demonstrates that elections alone are insufficient for democratic consolidation when underlying power structures remain authoritarian in orientation (Jalal, 1995). Civilian governments entered office with limited authority, operating within boundaries informally set by non-elected institutions, which systematically constrained

democratic decision-making and long-term policy planning.

A central analytical theme emerging from this study is the constitutionalization of political instability through Article 58(2)(b). Rather than serving as a safeguard against authoritarianism, this provision became an instrument for executive overreach and political engineering. Its repeated use normalized the premature dismissal of elected governments and undermined the sanctity of parliamentary mandates, thereby weakening democratic accountability and continuity (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2022). The persistence of this mechanism reflects how legal frameworks can be manipulated to sustain undemocratic power relations, creating an environment of constant political uncertainty.

Civil-military relations further explain the fragility of democracy during this era. Although Pakistan did not experience prolonged direct military rule in the 1990s, the military's indirect dominance over security and foreign policy created a parallel power structure that eclipsed civilian authority. This phenomenon aligns with theories of praetorianism, where the military views itself as the ultimate guardian of national interest, legitimizing intervention in civilian politics (Rizvi, 2000; Fair, 2014). The military's influence extended to political decision-making, bureaucratic appointments, economic planning, and even oversight of development projects, highlighting its pervasive role in state affairs. This also discouraged civilian governments from pursuing policies that might conflict with military priorities, leading to a culture of self-censorship and constrained governance.

The role of political parties also warrants critical examination. Rather than acting as vehicles for democratic socialization and representation, parties remained elite-driven and personalized, prioritizing short-term power struggles over institutional development. The adversarial nature of party competition fostered political deadlock and incentivized reliance on non-democratic actors to resolve conflicts, further eroding democratic norms (Talbot, 2009; Waseem, 2022). Intra-party factionalism, weak organizational structures, and lack of ideological coherence

prevented coherent policy formulation and long-term planning, further undermining governance capacity.

Judicial behavior during this period illustrates the limits of legal institutionalism in fragile democracies. While the judiciary occasionally asserted independence, its frequent validation of presidential dissolutions reinforced executive dominance and constitutional uncertainty. This selective constitutionalism weakened the rule of law and contributed to democratic erosion by failing to provide consistent protection for parliamentary sovereignty (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2006). Judicial politicization also undermined public confidence in impartiality, discouraging legal challenges against corruption and maladministration and reinforcing elite control over political processes.

Economic governance emerged as an additional factor shaping democratic legitimacy. Civilian governments faced severe fiscal constraints, external debt pressures, and structural adjustment conditionalities that limited policy autonomy. Governance failures, corruption allegations, and mismanagement delegitimized democratic rule and strengthened narratives favoring technocratic or authoritarian alternatives (Noman, 1990; Siddiq, 2007). Ineffective economic management fueled social grievances, including rising unemployment, poverty, regional disparities, and urban-rural inequalities, which further eroded public confidence in civilian administrations.

Elite dominance over democratic processes further restricted political inclusion. Decision-making remained concentrated among a narrow political-bureaucratic-military elite, marginalizing broader societal participation. Civil society and local governance institutions were largely excluded from policymaking, preventing the development of participatory mechanisms and reducing accountability (Cheema & Siddiq, 2010; Cohen, 2004). This elite-centric governance model entrenched inequality and hindered the emergence of a responsive political system.

External and regional security dynamics further complicated democratic governance. Ongoing tensions with India, nuclearization, and regional instability elevated the military's strategic

importance, reinforcing its political leverage over civilian governments. Security-centric decision-making marginalized democratic accountability and encouraged governments to prioritize short-term stability over long-term institutional development (Rizvi, 2000; Fair, 2014). Moreover, international aid conditionalities, pressure from global financial institutions, and foreign policy alignments also influenced domestic political strategies, often limiting the scope for autonomous democratic reforms.

Societal fragmentation along ethnic, linguistic, and provincial lines intensified political instability during this period. These cleavages were frequently exploited by political elites and non-democratic institutions to justify interventions, weakening national political cohesion. The absence of inclusive governance mechanisms to accommodate diverse interests contributed to political polarization, regional tensions, and cyclical crises that undermined state legitimacy.

The repeated collapse of governments prevented institutional continuity and policy learning. Each dismissal reset administrative priorities and governance structures, creating a cycle of instability that undermined state capacity. Bureaucratic professionalism suffered due to constant leadership changes, and the lack of long-term planning impeded developmental projects and social policy implementation (Shah, 2014). This cyclical instability entrenched public cynicism and normalized the perception that democracy in Pakistan was inherently fragile.

Additionally, the interplay of regional, international, and domestic pressures created a multi-layered environment of constraint for civilian governments. Diplomatic tensions, economic sanctions, and global security concerns often justified military intervention and prioritized stability over democratic deepening. These external pressures interacted with domestic institutional weaknesses, reinforcing the systemic vulnerability of democratic governance.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that Pakistan's democratic failure between 1988 and 1999 was systemic rather than episodic. The interaction of constitutional design, civil-military dominance, weak political parties, judicial

ambiguity, governance failures, economic constraints, societal fragmentation, and external pressures produced a fragile democratic order vulnerable to collapse. Understanding this interplay is essential for explaining not only the 1999 military coup but also Pakistan's subsequent struggles with democratic consolidation and the ongoing challenges in building a resilient democratic culture (Jalal, 1995; Shah, 2014).

Conclusion

The democratic experience of Pakistan between 1988 and 1999 illustrates a period of profound institutional fragility and political volatility, providing crucial lessons for understanding democratic consolidation in post-colonial states. This period was characterized not merely by the succession of civilian governments but by the persistent subordination of elected institutions to entrenched non-elected actors, particularly the military and the presidency. Despite the restoration of electoral democracy following General Zia-ul-Haq's death, civilian administrations lacked substantive authority, and governance was continually constrained by informal power structures that dictated the limits of political autonomy (Jalal, 1995; Rizvi, 2000). As a result, Pakistan's democracy during this era functioned largely as a procedural framework rather than a system with substantive legitimacy, rendering the political order inherently fragile.

A central element of this fragility was the repeated manipulation of constitutional mechanisms, especially Article 58(2)(b), which allowed the presidency to dismiss elected governments on vague grounds of corruption or governance failure. The frequent invocation of this article undermined parliamentary sovereignty, institutionalized political instability, and normalized extra-constitutional interventions as a political tool (Newberg, 1995; Waseem, 2022). The judiciary's selective endorsement of these dismissals further weakened the rule of law and compromised constitutional predictability, preventing the establishment of a resilient democratic framework. The interplay between constitutional provisions and judicial behavior demonstrates how legal mechanisms, if politicized,

can inadvertently facilitate the erosion of democratic governance rather than safeguard it. Political parties also played a critical role in shaping democratic outcomes during this period. Rather than functioning as stabilizing institutions that institutionalize political debate and promote policy continuity, parties remained personalized and elite-driven, relying heavily on patronage networks and familial leadership. This personalization of politics exacerbated adversarial competition, incentivized the manipulation of extra-parliamentary actors to resolve conflicts, and hindered the development of programmatic politics (Talbot, 2009; Waseem, 2022). The absence of strong internal party democracy and ideological coherence meant that elected governments struggled to implement long-term policies or pursue institutional reforms, further undermining governance capacity and public confidence.

Economic mismanagement and governance failures compounded the challenges facing civilian governments. Structural adjustment pressures, fiscal constraints, corruption allegations, and uneven service delivery contributed to public perceptions that democratic governments were ineffective and incapable of meeting basic social and economic needs (Noman, 1990; Siddiqua, 2007). These socio-economic grievances, combined with elite dominance and limited political inclusion, reinforced the notion that civilian administrations were ineffective, which in turn provided justification for military intervention in the political sphere. The structural and policy vulnerabilities of the state were therefore deeply intertwined with societal perceptions and legitimacy crises, highlighting the multidimensional nature of democratic fragility. Furthermore, societal fragmentation along ethnic, linguistic, and provincial lines intensified political instability during this period. Political elites and non-democratic institutions often exploited these cleavages to consolidate power or justify interventions, thereby weakening national cohesion and perpetuating cycles of conflict. External pressures, including regional security tensions, nuclearization, and international aid conditionalities, further constrained the scope of

civilian decision-making and prioritized short-term stability over democratic deepening (Rizvi, 2000; Fair, 2014). These factors combined to produce an environment in which democracy could exist procedurally but lacked the institutional resilience and legitimacy necessary to withstand repeated crises.

Ultimately, the democratic breakdown culminating in the 1999 military coup should be understood not as an abrupt rupture but as the culmination of a decade-long process of institutional erosion, elite dominance, and governance failure. The interaction of constitutional manipulation, civil-military imbalance, weak political parties, selective judicial intervention, governance deficiencies, economic constraints, and societal fragmentation produced a systemic vulnerability that allowed authoritarian intervention to appear as a corrective rather than an aberration. Understanding this period is critical for interpreting Pakistan's subsequent political trajectory and recurring challenges to democratic consolidation, as it highlights the need for reforms that go beyond procedural elections to include institutional strengthening, civilian supremacy, programmatic party politics, judicial independence, and socio-economic governance.

In brief, the lessons from 1988–1999 underscore that sustainable democracy requires a holistic approach addressing the interaction between institutions, governance, socio-economic development, and political culture. Without such comprehensive reform, the risk of democratic instability remains persistent, and the formal restoration of elections alone will not guarantee the consolidation of democratic norms. Pakistan's experience demonstrates that the durability of democracy is contingent not only on procedural mechanisms but on the creation of an inclusive, accountable, and resilient institutional ecosystem capable of withstanding political crises, elite competition, and external pressures.

Way Forward

Moving forward, strengthening democracy in Pakistan requires a multidimensional reform agenda that directly addresses the structural weaknesses revealed during the 1988–1999

period. First, constitutional stability must be ensured through the protection of parliamentary sovereignty and the prevention of extra-constitutional or quasi-constitutional interventions in elected governments. This entails safeguarding democratic continuity, reinforcing checks and balances, and ensuring that constitutional provisions cannot be selectively manipulated to remove civilian administrations. Second, genuine civilian supremacy over the military is essential for democratic consolidation. This requires institutionalized parliamentary oversight of defense and security policy, greater transparency in military affairs, and the normalization of civilian authority over strategic decision-making, particularly in foreign and security policy domains.

Equally important is the strengthening of political parties as democratic institutions rather than personalized vehicles for elite power. Internal party democracy, transparent leadership selection, and program-based politics are necessary to reduce adversarial competition and foster consensus-building. Judicial independence must also be deepened through consistent constitutional interpretation and the insulation of courts from political influence, enabling the judiciary to function as a guardian of democratic continuity rather than an arbiter of political disputes. Finally, democratic sustainability depends on improved governance and socio-economic performance. Enhancing service delivery, combating corruption through institutional—not selective—accountability mechanisms, and broadening political participation can rebuild public trust in democratic institutions. Learning from the failures of 1988–1999, Pakistan's democratic future hinges on transforming procedural democracy into a substantive, inclusive, and institutionally balanced political order.

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