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Institutionalizing Disaster Governance in Pakistan: A Historical Analysis (1947–1999)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of disaster governance in Pakistan from 1947 to 1999, focusing on the interplay among political regimes, institutional legacies, and state capacity. Utilizing a qualitative historical-institutional methodology, this study highlights the path-dependent nature of disaster management development, characterized by fragmentation, reactive policy-making, and reliance on military-led interventions. The analysis revealed that colonial administrative frameworks and political instability hindered the establishment of cohesive, coordinated disaster management institutions. Although there were incremental improvements, such as the establishment of the Federal Flood Commission, which introduced elements of planning and coordination, the absence of centralized authority and weak civilian capacity hampered effective risk reduction. The findings demonstrate that disaster governance in Pakistan was predominantly oriented towards response rather than prevention. By situating institutional development within broader political and administrative contexts, this study enhances the understanding of governance challenges in the Global South. This underscores the necessity for integrated, resilient, and adaptive disaster management frameworks.

Keywords: *Disaster Governance; Pakistan; Historical Institutionalism; State Capacity; Institutional Development*

Introduction

Disasters have significantly influenced human history and social institutions. This exposes governance flaws and compels governments to reconsider risk management. Urbanization, environmental degradation, population growth, and climate change have increased the frequency and impact of disasters (Wisner et al., 2004; Kelman, 2020). These changes increase both human exposure and loss. States need to establish institutional structures for preparation, mitigation, and coordination as these dangers grow, rather than simply providing reactive assistance. Historically, disaster responses have been characterized by a lack of formal structure and a reactive approach. Communities have relied on local coping skills, religious bodies, or ad hoc government actions after catastrophes. Over time, disaster management has become a structured policy area, especially in industrialized nations. Specialized agencies, legislation, and delineated roles have been developed for governmental and non-governmental entities, facilitating systematic cooperation among governments, civil society, and humanitarian

organizations (Tierney, 2014). In contrast, many developing nations still rely on fragmented, reactive responses due to limited resources, weak capacity, and competing priorities (Pelling, 2003).

Since 1947, Pakistan has experienced diverse natural hazards, including floods, earthquakes, and droughts, making it a valuable case study for understanding disaster governance in a developing country. However, in the early years of state formation, disaster management did not emerge as a clearly defined policy area. Instead, state-managed disasters are handled through provisional administrative structures and military assistance. Such arrangements have led to weak coordination among government institutions and the limited integration of policy into development planning (Mustafa, 2003; Kugelman, 2012). Successive governments have not learned lessons from past disaster management and have rarely incorporated them into reforms or future planning. This approach has been adopted across different regimes in Pakistan for decades, underscoring the need for an innovative and well-planned disaster management framework.

Pakistan's disaster governance relied heavily on colonial administrative structures inherited from British India, which used disaster management as a tool to maintain political order and safeguard revenue (Arnold, 1988). Relief efforts during colonial rule mainly addressed famine management, flood control through irrigation infrastructure, and short-term emergency assistance (Pelling, 2003). In 1947, when Pakistan became an independent state, it faced urgent challenges, including refugee resettlement, food shortages, economic instability, and political uncertainty. Consequently, disaster management was deprioritized within the broader state-building agenda, resulting in a slow response to disaster governance. Muhammad and Hassan (2025) contend that flood disasters in Pakistan disproportionately impact women, yet the government has not prioritized addressing gender concerns in disaster management. During the early decades, Pakistan faced natural hazards, particularly floods and droughts; however, government responses relied on existing bureaucratic and military structures. The focus has been on disaster management rather than prevention or preparedness.

Literature Review

Despite growing international scholarship on various dimensions of disaster risk reduction, Pakistan's disaster management institutions have not been comprehensively studied. Most studies have focused on reforms since the 2000s, overlooking the decades following independence (Khan & Khan, 2008). Kafle (2017) argues that colonial administrative systems in South Asia fostered a top-down approach to disaster management, emphasizing centralized authority and military mobilization during crises, while civilian protection and long-term risk reduction received less attention. One study focused on 1947–1999, a critical period for understanding the institutional foundations of Pakistan's disaster governance (Khan & Khan, 2008). Another study analyzed how different political regimes and administrative traditions influenced the formation of disaster management institutions in Pakistan (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). This is the first systematic historical analysis of disaster management institutions in Pakistan from 1947 to 1999. The findings explain the institutional legacies that have affected contemporary disaster management reforms and offer insights into the challenges governments face when establishing resilient governance systems. Abdelaziz and Mesbah (2021) noted that most early disaster management models emphasized relief over long-term planning and risk reduction and lacked coordination and systematic evaluation. However, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, disaster management frameworks evolved toward more integrated and proactive approaches. Global initiatives such as the Hyogo Framework for Action (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction [UNISDR], 2005) and the

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015) emphasized preparedness, mitigation, and resilience

Contemporary frameworks prioritize mitigation, recovery, and risk reduction (UNDRR, 2021). Iqbal, Perez, and Barthelemy (2021) highlight the increasing role of technology, including hazard mapping and early warning systems. Additionally, disaster governance frameworks increasingly incorporate social and economic dimensions (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021). Modern disaster management approaches increasingly emphasize the need to integrate various components of disaster governance. For developing nations, where disaster management systems must operate within constraints such as limited resources, complex governance, and challenging socioeconomic conditions, this issue is especially crucial. Therefore, flexible and adaptable management frameworks are necessary to address specific challenges in disaster governance in developing nations.

Therefore, the literature emphasizes the need for flexible, iterative disaster management frameworks that can adapt to diverse governance and resource environments (Walker et al., 2004). Historical evidence suggests that countries with strong institutional frameworks and integrated planning are more successful in reducing the impact of disasters. In contrast, countries with weaker institutional arrangements often face significant challenges in developing effective disaster management systems (UNDRR, 2015; Wisner et al., 2004; Aldrich, 2012). In Pakistan, significant institutional gaps existed before 2000. The absence of a single disaster management authority led to dependency on the army. These institutional weaknesses reflect the broader challenges faced by developing countries, where limited state capacity often constrains the development of effective disaster governance systems. Maqbool and Hussain (2014) provide a detailed analysis of the institutional history of disaster management in Pakistan and highlight the broader challenges in building effective disaster governance systems.

In Pakistan, bureaucratic inefficiency, competing policy priorities, and limited technical expertise have contributed to the ineffective implementation of disaster-related policies. Consequently, disaster governance in Pakistan has historically lacked strong institutional coordination and operational capacity. It is argued that major disasters often create opportunities for the state to introduce institutional reforms. However, Pakistan has often struggled to capitalize on such reform opportunities. Institutional development requires social legitimacy, sustained political commitment, and long-term investment. Therefore, it is important to analyze the historical development of disaster management institutions in Pakistan and examine the structural and political factors that influenced their evolution before 2000. Although such centralized structures provided mechanisms for coordination, they also limited local initiative and community participation. In many cases, this legacy continues to influence disaster governance structures in the region today. Khan and Mesbah (2020) argue that Pakistan inherited a fragmented governance structure at independence, which limited its ability to manage recurring natural disasters such as floods and cyclones effectively. Disaster management practices in Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s remained largely centralized and military-driven. Emergency responses often bypassed civilian institutions and community participation mechanisms. From a comparative perspective, Pakistan's institutional evolution in disaster management has been slower than that of several neighboring countries. This outcome can be attributed to broader governance challenges, including weak state-building processes, political fragmentation, and institutional instability.

Objectives of the Study

This study examines the historical evolution of disaster management institutions in Pakistan from 1947 to 1999. It also analyzes the political, administrative, and institutional factors that shaped disaster governance during this period and examines how disaster management developed within Pakistan's broader process of state formation and governance. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Analyze the historical development of disaster management strategies in Pakistan
2. To examine the institutional and administrative structures established by the state to address catastrophes during various political eras
3. Determine the institutional and structural constraints that hindered the establishment of a successful disaster management framework in Pakistan before 2000.

Research Questions

Based on these objectives, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did disaster-management institutions emerge in Pakistan from 1947 to 1999?
2. What role do political systems play in creating policies and institutions for disaster management?
3. What were the problems with the structure and governance that made it difficult for Pakistan to build strong disaster-management institutions?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical-institutional approach to examine the evolution of disaster management institutions in Pakistan between 1947 and 1999. This research focuses on understanding how historical developments, political contexts, and institutional arrangements by different regimes have shaped disaster governance in Pakistan. This study primarily relies on documentary and archival analyses. Data were collected from government reports, policy documents, legislation, official records, and reports of national and international organizations related to disaster management. In addition, secondary sources, such as academic books, journal articles, and prior research, were used to provide historical context and analytical insights.

Post-Independence Period (1947–1958) Early Disaster Response and Institutional Limitations

Pakistan has faced severe administrative, political, and humanitarian challenges since gaining independence in 1947 (Khan & Mesbah, 2020; Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). The new state had to address numerous problems, including mass migration, intergroup violence, refugee resettlement, and the urgent need to build a nation (Kafle, 2017). In this chaotic setting, the state's main goal was to establish key governance and administrative processes rather than traditional disaster management systems (Paul & Routray, 2010). The state has focused on political stability and administrative consolidation, thereby giving little attention to preparedness for catastrophes or risk management (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). At both the provincial and federal levels, existing bureaucratic systems were used to run most relief efforts (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). Federal and provincial institutions have exhibited inadequate coordination. Ambiguous and redundant responsibilities have resulted in delays and inefficiencies in disaster response (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014).

There are no established methods for analyzing risks, allocating resources, or ensuring disaster readiness. There are almost no early warning systems, which makes it much harder for the state to respond quickly to new challenges. (Paul & Routray, 2010). The military has increasingly become a crucial component of disaster response, particularly in logistical support, evacuating affected individuals, and distributing relief goods (Kafle, 2017). Maqbool and Hussain (2014) underscored the institutional limitations of civilian administrative structures. Bureaucrats of that period were not trained in broad government functions, such as disaster management

(Khan & Mesbah, 2020). The 1950 floods in the Indus Basin exemplify the significant institutional deficiencies prevalent in disaster management during that period (Paul & Routray, 2010). Without well-developed disaster management institutions, other risks, including earthquakes in the north and cyclones along the Sindh coast, have also been addressed informally and without long-term planning (Kafle, 2017).

There has been little effort to fix structural problems or establish systematic ways to prevent and prepare for disasters. The absence of a legal and institutional framework further limits the development of systematic disaster risk management (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). Disaster policies are informal, temporary, and inadequate for handling specific incidents. The state viewed natural disasters as short-term problems rather than long-term structural concerns that required a systematic government response (Paul & Routray, 2010). Consequently, disaster management during this period was decentralized, disorganized, and primarily reactive. However, the difficulties and restrictions encountered in these formative years progressively underscored the need for more organized institutional structures, which subsequently shaped initiatives aimed at centralized governance changes. Overall, this period was marked by fragmented reactive catastrophe governance, resulting in a vacuum. Military and bureaucratic frameworks address institutional deficiencies arising from the lack of specialized disaster management organizations (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). Institutional deficiencies and ad hoc administrative practices shaped Pakistan's disaster management approach during its first 10 years of independence. The state prioritized nation-building, constitutional development, and administrative consolidation over natural disaster preparedness.

Figure 1. Institutional Evolution of Disaster Governance in Pakistan (1947–1999)

This figure presents the evolution of disaster governance institutions in Pakistan, highlighting the phases of the regime, institutional development, and changes in capacity over time.

1947–1958	1958–1969	1969–1977	1977–1988	1988–1999
Early State Formation	Ayub Regime	Bhutto Era	Zia Regime	Democratic Phase
Ad hoc relief; weak coordination	Centralized admin; basic civil defence	Expansion of state role; relief focus	Militarization; disaster response emphasis	Fragmented but expanding institutions
Relief Commissioners	Civil Defence structures	Federal relief bodies	Military-led response units	Provincial disaster cells
Low	Low–Moderate	Moderate	Moderate (centralized)	Moderate–Transition

Source: Author's conceptualization based on historical institutional analysis.

Centralized Disaster Governance under Military Rule (1958–1971)

The military coup in 1958, led by General Ayub Khan, brought a centralized and technocratic style of government to Pakistan (Khan & Mesbah, 2020; Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). During this time, disaster management was included in national planning and administrative control but was not considered an autonomous policy domain (Kafle, 2017). The federal government held most of the power, whereas provincial governments mostly followed its orders. Flooding along the Indus River remained a key disaster issue during this period (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). In response, the state relied primarily on large-scale engineering solutions to regulate floods. These include the construction of embankments, barrages, and irrigation systems to control water flow and reduce flood damage (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). Although these projects contributed to flood management, they could not strengthen institutional preparedness mechanisms, early warning systems, and community-based mitigation strategies. The role of the military in responding to disasters has increased during this time. The Pakistan Army and Civil Defense groups played important roles in evacuation efforts, logistics coordination, and the delivery of relief supplies to people (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). It also strengthened the militarized approach to disaster administration, impeding the development of civilian disaster management capabilities (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014).

Disaster responses typically rely on temporary committees to address specific situations. These structures lack continuity and institutional history, making it difficult to develop long-term disaster plans and risk-reduction measures (Kafle, 2017). Despite these institutional problems, some forms of learning have begun to develop. Provincial departments have begun to document disaster events carefully, and there have been limited attempts to test flood protection techniques and agricultural recovery programs (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). The 1958–1971 period marked the onset of a centralized institutional strategy for managing disasters in Pakistan. Significant structural weaknesses were apparent during this period. Excessive centralization restricts provincial authorities' involvement and excludes local communities from disaster preparedness and response mechanisms (Khan & Mesbah, 2020). Additionally, the ongoing reliance on ad hoc administrative arrangements has impeded the development of comprehensive disaster management institutions (Maqbool & Hussain, 2014). Nonetheless, the lessons from this period, particularly the dangers linked to over-centralization, militarization, and limited community involvement, later shaped efforts to create more structured disaster management frameworks in subsequent political eras, including the reforms introduced during the Bhutto era (Kafle, 2017; Paul & Routray, 2010).

Expansion of State-Led Disaster Management Institutions (1971–1977)

The period of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's civilian administration (1971–1977) represented a significant shift in Pakistan's approach to disaster management (Shah & Ahmad, 2016; Iqbal et al., 2021). After the 1971 conflict and the subsequent secession of East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh, the country encountered major political, economic, and environmental hurdles (Ali & Khan, 2018). Concurrently, the recurring floods of 1973 and 1976 revealed significant infrastructure deficiencies and institutional shortcomings in disaster response and preparedness (Jamal, 2015). These events underscore the need for a more organized and systematic strategy for disaster governance (Iqbal et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, the Bhutto administration began transitioning from a reactive disaster response approach to incorporating disaster management into the broader framework of national development planning (Shah & Ahmad, 2016). A more robust state-driven governance model characterized this era, as the government sought to strengthen institutional capabilities and establish more organized responses to natural disasters (Ali & Khan, 2018). A key institutional advancement during this

time was the creation of the Federal Flood Commission (FFC) in 1977 (Jamal, 2015). The institution was established as a permanent, specialized entity tasked with flood planning and forecasting, and with coordinating efforts between federal and provincial bodies. Its formation marked the initial effort to create a formal institutional structure for managing flood risks in Pakistan (Shah & Ahmad, 2016).

During this period, sectoral institutions experienced growth. Provincial departments, including those focused on agriculture, irrigation, and public works, began formulating contingency strategies to tackle issues such as crop failures, infrastructure damage, and other disaster-related problems (Iqbal et al., 2021). Concurrently, scientific and technical contributions, particularly in meteorology and hydrology, began to play a more significant role in policy development. This change signifies a gradual transition towards more evidence-based methods in disaster management (Ali & Khan, 2018). The 1973 and 1976 floods highlighted significant deficiencies in both physical infrastructure and institutional coordination, underscoring the necessity for more structured disaster management systems. Consequently, the government took measures to construct embankments, dams, and irrigation control systems to mitigate flood risks in the Indus River Basin (Shah & Ahmad, 2016). However, despite these efforts, several institutional challenges persist, particularly in federal-provincial coordination. In addition, community participation in disaster management remains limited (Iqbal et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the Bhutto era was among the first and most significant attempts to establish a formal disaster management system in Pakistan prior to 21st-century reforms (Ali & Khan, 2018). During this time, the Bhutto administration transitioned from a solely reactive, relief-focused strategy to a more organized, state-driven institutional framework, setting the stage for future advancements in disaster management policy and institutional capabilities (Jamal, 2015; Shah & Ahmad, 2016).

Stagnation and Militarization of Disaster Governance during the Zia-ul-Haq Regime (1977–1988)

The era of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988) was characterized by relative stagnation in the advancement of Pakistan's disaster management institutions (Ahmed, 2019; Hussain & Riaz, 2017). Disaster management policies largely remained centered on emergency relief rather than long-term mitigation, preparedness, or institutional development (Malik, 2018). During this period, the government made limited efforts to decentralize disaster administration by shifting certain responsibilities to provincial and local governments (Hussain & Riaz, 2017). However, these decentralization efforts often led to additional coordination challenges rather than enhancing disaster management systems (Ahmed, 2019). Under the Zia regime, military institutions increasingly assumed responsibility for relief operations, evacuation efforts, and logistical coordination during disasters (Malik, 2018). Consequently, the development of civilian institutions and technical expertise in disaster management remains limited (Hussain & Riaz, 2017).

Floods were the most frequent and significant natural hazard during this period, especially in the Indus River Basin (Ahmed, 2019). Simultaneously, cyclones along the coast and earthquakes in the northern regions highlight the diverse disaster risks faced by the country. The essential elements of modern disaster management, such as early warning systems, hazard mapping, and long-term planning, remained largely underdeveloped during this period (Malik, 2018). Established in 1977, the Federal Flood Commission continues to serve as the main body for flood planning and coordination. Nevertheless, its operations were largely confined to a

narrow technical scope, lacking support for the broader institutional reforms needed to enhance disaster governance across sectors (Hussain & Riaz, 2017).

During this time, civil society's involvement in disaster management was minimal, mirroring the broader political climate of centralized military rule. Limited engagement with local communities and non-governmental organizations further hindered the development of inclusive disaster management frameworks (Ahmed, 2019). Overall, the Zia-ul-Haq era entrenched a pattern of militarized and fragmented disaster governance in Pakistan. Although the institutional groundwork laid during the Bhutto era remained intact, the lack of significant reforms impeded the progress of comprehensive disaster management systems. Consequently, disaster governance during this period continued to rely heavily on reactive relief mechanisms and military-led operations (Malik, 2018). Therefore, this period marks a phase of institutional stagnation in Pakistan's disaster management history. Ongoing coordination gaps, dependence on military institutions, and limited efforts in civilian capacity building hindered the development of more integrated disaster governance frameworks.

Disaster Management during the 1990s and Democratic Transition

The restoration of democracy in Pakistan during the 1990s marked a pivotal phase in the development of disaster management (Khan & Siddiqui, 2015; Jabeen, 2018). Political instability, frequent government changes, and weak institutional continuity have significantly hindered reform efforts. Major disasters, such as the 1992 floods and 1999 cyclone in Sindh, highlighted the country's persistent vulnerabilities in the disaster governance system (Rashid & Qureshi, 2017). A critical gap during this period was the lack of a national coordinating authority. Federal and provincial departments largely operated in isolation, early warning systems remained weak, and reliance on the military continued to dominate disaster response (Khan & Siddiqui, 2015). Despite these challenges, the 1990s saw the increasing involvement of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Edhi Foundation and the Pakistan Red Crescent Society. These organizations were crucial in relief and rehabilitation efforts, underscoring the significance of community-based approaches, volunteer mobilization, and participatory planning in disaster management (Jabeen, 2018).

Institutional fragmentation posed a significant challenge during this period. Although several sectoral departments and the Federal Flood Commission continued their operations, there was no overarching legal or administrative authority to coordinate disaster management across various hazards, sectors, or regions (Khan & Siddiqui, 2015). The lack of coordination among provincial departments, municipal authorities, and federal ministries has resulted in duplicated efforts, delayed responses, and inefficient resource management. Early warning systems and preparedness planning remain underdeveloped and poorly organized. The lack of a national disaster authority has led to structural deficiencies that impede effective risk reduction and recovery efforts following major disasters (Jabeen, 2018). Persistent political instability constrains disaster governance. Frequent government changes, administrative turnover, and shifting policy priorities have disrupted the development of institutional capacity. The continued reliance on the military for logistics and relief reinforces the historical pattern of militarized disaster response. This dependency underscores the enduring lack of sustainable civilian capacity and highlights the need for a more structured, professional, and inclusive approach to disaster management (Rashid & Qureshi, 2017).

Conclusion

From 1947 to 1999, disaster management in Pakistan transitioned from reactive ad hoc relief efforts to the initial stages of institutionalized governance. This historical progression underscores the ongoing challenges of political instability, bureaucratic fragmentation, and

overreliance on the military, all of which have hindered the development of effective disaster management. Limited civilian capacity, technical expertise, and community involvement further constrained the state's ability to implement proactive, coordinated disaster responses. Despite these constraints, this period witnessed significant institutional experimentation. The creation of entities such as the Federal Flood Commission, sectoral contingency planning within provincial departments, and the gradual involvement of civil society and NGOs laid the initial foundation for structured disaster governance. Recurrent disasters, such as floods, cyclones, and earthquakes, reveal systemic vulnerabilities, but also offer opportunities for learning and incremental institutional improvement. Although a comprehensive national disaster management system was not established before 2000, the cumulative experience of repeated disasters, early institutional efforts, and civil society engagement set the stage for reform in the early 21st century.

This historical analysis reveals that effective disaster governance necessitates not only formal institutional frameworks but also political stability, technical expertise, coordination across various levels of government, and inclusive engagement with local communities. These lessons continue to shape contemporary disaster policies in Pakistan and provide valuable insights for other developing countries facing similar hazards and governance challenges.

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