



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#.1406-1417

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.082) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.082)

<https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.082>

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://www.openjournal.org/)



Waves of Instability: Mapping Pakistan's Political Instability and Social Unrest (2021–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the political and social unrest in Pakistan between 2021 and 2025, focusing on key events that shaped the country's instability. The study analyzes the overthrow of the PTI government in 2022, which triggered widespread protests and deepened political divisions. The emergence of opposition movements, including the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and later youth-led resistance, further polarized the political landscape. A critical turning point was the 9th May 2023 protests, where violent clashes erupted following Imran Khan's arrest, exposing severe civil-military tensions. The research investigates how public discontent was fueled by institutional failures, including judicial bias, media censorship, and economic mismanagement. The study employs Political Process Theory to assess how protest movements mobilized amid shifting political opportunities, while State Fragility and Governance Theory explains Pakistan's recurring instability due to weak institutions and military interference. Findings reveal a vicious cycle: political crises deepen public frustration, leading to protests, crackdowns, and further governance decline. The media's role was dual both as a tool for mobilization (through social media) and a target of state repression. The judiciary faced accusations of politicization, while youth activism emerged as a powerful force challenging the status quo. The study concludes with policy recommendations: institutional reforms to strengthen democracy, military disengagement from politics, and inclusive dialogue to address societal grievances. Without structural changes, Pakistan risks prolonged instability, undermining its democratic and economic future. This research contributes to understanding how governance failures and repression exacerbate unrest, offering lessons for fragile states globally.

Keywords: *Political Instability, Political Division, Social Unrest, Reforms, Democracy, Governance Theory.*

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape has been marred by instability since its inception in 1947, characterized by cycles of democratic transitions and authoritarian rule. The country has experienced four military coups (1958, 1977, 1999, 2007) and numerous premature terminations of civilian governments, often attributed to corruption, weak governance, or military intervention (Jalal, 1995). This pattern of instability stems from a fragile institutional equilibrium, where key institutions—such as the judiciary, media, and electoral bodies—are frequently politicized, undermining democratic consolidation (Ahmad, 2017). The military, as Pakistan's most dominant institution, has historically exerted disproportionate influence over politics, even during civilian rule, creating a persistent civil-military imbalance that fuels political crises (Haqqani, 2005). These structural weaknesses have perpetuated a cycle of unrest, with public trust in democratic processes eroding amid elite power struggles and institutional failures.

The period from 2021 to 2025 marked a critical juncture in Pakistan's political trajectory, epitomizing the interplay between institutional fragility and social unrest. The ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a no-confidence motion in April 2022—the first constitutional removal of a sitting premier—signaled a new phase of instability (Dawn News, 2022). This event, framed by the PTI as a "regime change conspiracy," triggered mass protests and deepened civil-military tensions. The May 9, 2023, protests, which saw unprecedented attacks on military installations following Khan's arrest, underscored the volatility of public sentiment and the state's repressive response, including mass arrests and military trials (Amnesty International, 2023). Concurrently, economic collapse—with inflation soaring to 30% and GDP growth plummeting to 0.3% in 2023—exacerbated public discontent, revealing how political instability and economic distress are mutually reinforcing (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This period thus offers a pivotal case study for examining the dynamics of instability in hybrid regimes.

This study seeks to address three key objectives: (1) identifying the major political events and institutional failures that drove instability from 2021 to 2025; (2) analyzing the relationship between political instability and the surge in social unrest; and (3) assessing the consequences for governance, public trust, and democratic norms. Central research questions include: How did elite conflicts and military interventions shape political outcomes? What role did youth mobilization and digital activism play in protests? And how did state repression exacerbate societal polarization? By answering these questions, the study aims to bridge a critical gap in literature, as prior research has focused on isolated crises rather than the systemic interplay of factors in this period (Zaidi, 2022).

The analysis is guided by two theoretical frameworks. Political Process Theory (McAdam, 1982) illuminates how political opportunities—such as the PTI's dismissal—enabled mobilization, while State Fragility Theory (Rotberg, 2003) explains how institutional weaknesses (e.g., judicial bias, electoral delays) intensified unrest. Together, these lenses reveal how Pakistan's instability is both a product of elite maneuvering and structural deficiencies, offering insights into pathways for democratic reform.

Literature Review

Definitions of Political Instability and Social Unrest

Political instability refers to the frequent disruption of governance through contested leadership transitions, institutional failures, or violent conflicts (Alesina et al., 1996). In the context of Pakistan, it manifests as military coups, constitutional crises, and abrupt changes in government, often exacerbated by weak democratic norms and elite power struggles (Cheema, 2015). Social unrest, as defined by Tilly (2004), encompasses collective actions such as protests, riots, and digital activism, driven by grievances against political exclusion, economic hardship, or state repression. The intersection of these phenomena in Pakistan has created cyclical crises, where political instability fuels public dissent, which in turn deepens governance failures (Zaidi, 2022). For instance, the 2021–2025 period saw mass protests following Imran Khan's ouster, illustrating how elite conflicts translate into street-level mobilization (Gallup, 2023).

Historical Context: Military Interventions, Judicial Activism, and Elite Power Struggles

Pakistan's history is marked by repeated military interventions, with direct rule during 1958–1971, 1977–1988, and 1999–2008, each undermining civilian authority (Jalal, 1995). The military's role as a "kingmaker" persists even during democratic phases, influencing elections and policy through covert means (Haqqani, 2005). Judicial activism has further complicated governance, with courts dismissing elected leaders (e.g., Prime Ministers Gillani in 2012 and Sharif in 2017) but facing accusations of politicization (Khan, 2023). Elite power struggles, particularly between the PTI, PML-N, and PPP, often prioritize personal vendettas over institutional reform, perpetuating instability (Siddiqi, 2023). The 2022 no-confidence motion against Imran Khan exemplified this, where opposition alliances (PDM) leveraged institutional weaknesses to force a regime change, triggering widespread unrest (Dawn News, 2022).

Key Studies on Pakistan's Governance Challenges and Civil-Military Relations

Scholars like Shah (2014) highlight the military's "deep state" influence, where it controls defense, foreign policy, and even media narratives, marginalizing civilian governments. Rizvi (2019) notes that post-2008 democratic transitions failed to curb military dominance, as seen in the alleged manipulation of the 2018 elections to favor the PTI. Governance challenges are compounded by corruption—Pakistan ranked 140th in Transparency International's 2023 index—and economic mismanagement, which erode public trust (Malik, 2022). Research by the International Crisis Group (2023) links these factors to recurrent protests, such as the 2023 May 9 riots, where state repression worsened societal fractures.

Gaps Addressed by This Research

While existing studies focus on discrete crises (e.g., the 2007 Lawyers' Movement or 2014 PTI dharna), few analyze the 2021–2025 period as a cohesive case of instability (Zaidi, 2022). This study fills that gap by examining how institutional decay, civil-military tensions, and digital mobilization converged to escalate unrest. It also extends Political Process Theory by showing how Pakistan's "hybrid" regime creates unique opportunities for dissent (e.g., social media bypassing state-controlled media) and updates State Fragility Theory with contemporary examples like military trials of civilians (Amnesty International, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design to analyze Pakistan's political instability and social unrest from 2021 to 2025. The case study approach is particularly suited for examining complex socio-political phenomena, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of real-world events within their contextual settings (Yin, 2018). By focusing on Pakistan, this research captures the

interplay between institutional failures, elite conflicts, and public mobilization, offering a nuanced understanding of how political instability escalates into widespread unrest.

Data Sources

The study relies on primary and secondary data to ensure methodological rigor and triangulation. Primary data includes semi-structured interviews with 25 key informants, such as political analysts, journalists, civil society representatives, and human rights activists. These interviews provide insider perspectives on critical events like the no-confidence vote against Imran Khan and the May 9 protests, revealing how stakeholders perceived and responded to these crises (see Appendix for interview guide). Secondary data encompasses government reports, news archives (e.g., *Dawn*, *Al Jazeera*), and documentation from NGOs (e.g., HRCP, PILDAT), which offer verified accounts of events and institutional responses. Social media content (Twitter, Facebook) is also analyzed to gauge public sentiment and mobilization strategies during protests (Wolf, 2022).

Thematic Analysis

Data is analyzed through thematic content analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to:

1. Institutional Breakdown: Judicial interventions, electoral delays, and military influence.
2. Protest Dynamics: Shifts from peaceful rallies (e.g., PTI's "Haqiqi Azadi" marches) to violent unrest (May 9 riots).
3. State Repression: Use of military courts, internet shutdowns, and media censorship (Amnesty International, 2023).
4. Economic Grievances: Inflation and unemployment as catalysts for dissent (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Coding is guided by Political Process Theory (mobilization opportunities) and State Fragility Theory (institutional weaknesses), with NVivo software organizing themes for cross-event comparison (e.g., linking the no-confidence vote to subsequent protests).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical protocols include informed consent, anonymity for interviewees (assigned codes like "PA-1" for Political Analyst 1), and voluntary participation. Limitations include potential bias in interviewee responses due to political sensitivities and restricted access to classified government records. The study mitigates this by cross-verifying data with multiple sources and acknowledging gaps (e.g., reliance on reported arrest figures during crackdowns).

Historical Context of Political Instability in Pakistan

Pakistan's political system, while constitutionally structured as a federal parliamentary democracy, has been persistently overshadowed by the military's disproportionate influence since the country's inception in 1947. The 1973 Constitution established a bicameral legislature with a prime minister as chief executive, but in practice, the military has frequently intervened to shape political outcomes, either through direct coups or behind-the-scenes manipulation (Haqqani, 2005). This hybrid governance system has created an unstable equilibrium where civilian governments operate under the constant shadow of military veto power, particularly in matters of national security, foreign policy, and even domestic political appointments (Shah, 2014). The judiciary, rather than serving as an impartial arbiter, has often been drawn into political battles, alternately legitimizing military interventions (as in the 1999 Musharraf coup) and disqualifying elected leaders (like Prime Ministers Gillani and Sharif), further eroding institutional credibility (Siddiq, 2023). This structural imbalance between civilian and military institutions has been the

primary driver of Pakistan's chronic political instability, creating a system where democratic processes exist but are frequently subverted by extra-constitutional forces.

The country's history is punctuated by major crises that demonstrate this pattern, beginning with General Ayub Khan's 1958 coup, which ended Pakistan's fragile democratic experiment just eleven years after independence. The 1977 military takeover by General Zia-ul-Haq, following widespread protests against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government, ushered in an eleven-year dictatorship that fundamentally altered Pakistan's political trajectory through Islamization policies and the militarization of society (Jalal, 1995). General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup marked another breakdown of civilian rule, though his later resignation under pressure in 2008 created an opening for democratic restoration. Each of these interventions followed a similar script: civilian governments facing political or economic challenges would be removed by the military, which would then govern directly for years before orchestrating a managed transition back to nominal civilian rule (Fair, 2021). Crucially, these coups were often validated after the fact by a pliant judiciary, establishing a dangerous precedent that military intervention could be constitutional under the doctrine of "state necessity" (Khan, 2023). This cyclical pattern has created what scholars term a "praetorian democracy," where elections occur but within boundaries set by the military establishment (Rizvi, 2019).

The post-2008 period, while representing Pakistan's longest stretch of continuous civilian rule, has failed to break this pattern of instability. The democratic transitions between PPP (2008-2013), PML-N (2013-2018), and PTI (2018-2022) governments were marred by persistent civil-military tensions, with the military retaining control over key policy areas regardless of which party held office (International Crisis Group, 2023). The 2018 elections, which brought Imran Khan to power, were widely seen as engineered by the military to marginalize traditional parties, only for Khan himself to fall out with the establishment by 2021 (Dawn News, 2022). This period also saw the judiciary take an increasingly activist role, disqualifying sitting prime ministers on corruption charges while turning a blind eye to military overreach, highlighting the institutional imbalances that persist even during democratic phases (Zaidi, 2022). The 2022 no-confidence motion against Khan and subsequent 2023 protests revealed how quickly Pakistan's fragile democratic facade could collapse when the military withdrew its support, demonstrating that without fundamental reforms to civil-military relations, democratic transitions alone cannot ensure stability (Amnesty International, 2023). These persistent challenges underscore how Pakistan's political system remains trapped in a cycle where democratic institutions exist but cannot function independently of military influence, creating recurring crises that erupt whenever civilian leaders attempt to assert constitutional authority.

Political Instability (2021–2025): Key Events

The period from 2021 to 2025 marked one of Pakistan's most turbulent political chapters, beginning with the dramatic decline of Imran Khan's PTI government. By late 2021, cracks had emerged in Khan's relationship with the military establishment, particularly over the appointment of the new ISI chief in October, which Khan initially resisted before acquiescing under pressure (Dawn News, 2021). This tension coincided with growing economic difficulties, including soaring inflation and stalled IMF negotiations, which weakened the government's popularity. The opposition seized this moment, with eleven parties forming the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance in September 2020, which by early 2022 had mobilized mass protests accusing the government of economic mismanagement and military collusion (International Crisis Group,

2022). The political crisis culminated in April 2022 when Khan became the first Pakistani prime minister to be removed through a no-confidence vote, a constitutional process that nevertheless plunged the country into instability as Khan alleged a US-backed "regime change" conspiracy and mobilized his base against the new PDM-led government (Al Jazeera, 2022). This event marked a turning point, transforming Pakistan's political conflict from parliamentary maneuvering to street-level confrontation.

The crisis reached its zenith in 2023 with the unprecedented May 9 protests, triggered by Khan's arrest in the Al-Qadir Trust corruption case. PTI supporters attacked military installations, including the Lahore Corps Commander's House and Rawalpindi's GHQ headquarters - acts of defiance without precedent in Pakistan's history (Amnesty International, 2023). The state responded with extreme force, arresting over 10,000 PTI members and activists, many tried in military courts under anti-terrorism laws, while imposing nationwide internet shutdowns and media blackouts (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Simultaneously, the judiciary played an increasingly contentious role, with the Supreme Court ordering elections in Punjab while the government and Election Commission ignored these rulings, exposing deep institutional fractures (The Economist, 2023). These events demonstrated how quickly political disputes could escalate into systemic crises when combined with institutional dysfunction and the military's willingness to suppress dissent, severely damaging Pakistan's democratic credentials internationally.

The final years of this period (2024–2025) saw continued instability as electoral delays exacerbated polarization. Despite constitutional mandates, general elections were postponed from 2023 to February 2024 amid disputes over census results and constituency delimitation (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2024). This delay occurred alongside worsening economic conditions, with inflation peaking at 38% and the rupee collapsing to 300 against the dollar by mid-2023, creating widespread public despair (World Bank, 2023). Throughout this turmoil, social media emerged as a crucial battleground, with PTI using platforms like Twitter and YouTube to circumvent media blackouts, organizing virtual rallies that attracted millions of viewers (Wolf, 2023). However, the governments frequent internet shutdowns and platform bans revealed the state's determination to control digital spaces, even as activists developed workarounds like VPNs and encrypted messaging (Freedom House, 2024). This period ultimately demonstrated how Pakistan's political crises had evolved to incorporate new digital dimensions while retaining their fundamental character as struggles between civilian aspirations for democracy and the establishment's preference for controlled politics.

Social Unrest and Public Response in Pakistan (2021-2025)

The period from 2021 to 2025 witnessed an unprecedented escalation of social unrest in Pakistan, manifesting through diverse forms of public dissent. Peaceful protests organized by both the PTI and opposition PDM alliance gradually gave way to more violent expressions of discontent, particularly following Imran Khan's arrest in May 2023, when demonstrations turned into full-scale riots targeting military installations (Amnesty International, 2023). Simultaneously, digital activism emerged as a powerful new front, with youth-led campaigns like #ReleaseImranKhan and #May9Truth trending globally, amassing millions of engagements on platforms like Twitter and TikTok (Wolf, 2023). This period also saw innovative protest tactics, including nationwide virtual rallies when physical gatherings were banned, and the use of encrypted messaging apps to organize under government surveillance (Freedom House, 2024). The transformation from traditional street politics to hybrid digital-physical resistance marked a significant evolution in

Pakistan's protest culture, particularly among younger demographics frustrated with the political status quo.

At the heart of this unrest was Pakistan's youth bulge, with 64% of the population under 30 driving both online and offline mobilization (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). University students and young professionals formed the backbone of PTI's digital campaigns, while civil society organizations like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) documented state excesses and provided legal aid to protesters (HRCP, 2023). However, the youth movement's energy was matched by increasingly harsh state repression. Authorities conducted mass arrests exceeding 10,000 detentions after the May 9 protests, many under draconian anti-terrorism laws, while imposing over a dozen nationwide internet shutdowns to disrupt mobilization (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Media censorship reached new heights, with entire news channels taken off air and journalists arrested for covering opposition perspectives, creating what Reporters Without Borders termed an "information black hole" around key political events (RSF, 2023). These measures paradoxically amplified public anger while failing to quell dissent, as protesters developed increasingly sophisticated methods to circumvent restrictions.

The socioeconomic fallout from this period was profound and far-reaching. With inflation peaking at 38% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023), ordinary Pakistanis faced severe hardship, transforming economic grievances into potent political fuel. The brain drain accelerated dramatically, as over 800,000 skilled workers emigrated in 2023 alone - the highest annual figure in Pakistan's history (Bureau of Emigration, 2023). Institutional trust eroded to dangerous lows, with only 34% of citizens expressing confidence in government institutions by 2024 (PILDAT, 2024), while political polarization infected workplaces, universities, and even families. Perhaps most damaging was the military's diminished public standing, as its heavy-handed response to protests alienated segments of society that had traditionally revered it (International Crisis Group, 2024). These developments suggested that the social contract between state and society had fractured, with consequences that would likely shape Pakistan's political trajectory for years to come. The 2021-25 period thus represented not just another cyclical crisis, but potentially a watershed moment in Pakistan's troubled political history.

Analysis: Linking Political Instability and Social Unrest in Pakistan (2021-2025)

The political turbulence of 2021-2025 reveals fundamental pathologies in Pakistan's governance structure, where elite power struggles, military hegemony, and institutional decay converged to create perfect conditions for mass unrest. The ouster of Imran Khan through the 2022 no-confidence motion exemplified how Pakistan's political elites - including both civilian and military actors - prioritize personal power over institutional stability (Siddiq, 2023). The military establishment's abrupt withdrawal of support from Khan's government, after initially facilitating his rise, demonstrated its enduring role as political kingmaker, capable of making or breaking civilian governments at will (Shah, 2022). Meanwhile, the judiciary's inconsistent rulings - first validating Khan's removal, then ordering elections the government ignored - exposed how even nominally independent institutions become weaponized in political battles (Khan, 2023). This institutional decay created a vacuum where constitutional processes became meaningless, forcing political conflicts into the streets. The resulting unrest followed a clear pattern: each elite maneuver (like Khan's removal or later arrest) created new political opportunities for mobilization, while state fragility ensured no institutional channels existed to peacefully resolve grievances (Zaidi, 2023).

Comparative analysis with Pakistan's past crises reveals both familiar patterns and dangerous new developments. Like the 1977 protests against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto or the 2007 Lawyers' Movement against Musharraf, the 2021-25 unrest reflected public backlash against perceived authoritarian overreach (Jalal, 2022). However, several factors made this crisis distinct: First, the scale of youth participation through digital platforms created unprecedented mobilization capacity beyond traditional party structures (Wolf, 2023). Second, attacks on military symbols during the May 9 riots represented a qualitative shift in public willingness to directly challenge the army's sacrosanct status (International Crisis Group, 2023). Third, the globalized nature of the crisis, with diaspora communities amplifying protests through social media, made traditional censorship methods less effective (Freedom House, 2024). These differences suggest Pakistan's old playbook for managing unrest - alternating between coercion and co-option - may be becoming obsolete in the face of new technologies and generational change.

Applying theoretical frameworks illuminates why this period proved so combustible. Political Process Theory (McAdam, 1982) helps explain mobilization dynamics: Khan's removal created a "political opportunity" by revealing elite fractures, while his narrative of martyrdom provided "cognitive liberation" for supporters. Simultaneously, State Fragility Theory (Rotberg, 2003) clarifies how institutional failures escalated tensions - when courts issued contradictory rulings and election authorities delayed polls, it confirmed the state's inability to mediate conflict through legal channels. The interplay between these factors created a feedback loop: each protest further weakened state institutions, which in turn fueled more unrest by eliminating peaceful alternatives. Ultimately, the 2021-25 crisis underscores how Pakistan's hybrid regime - combining democratic facades with authoritarian realities - generates inherent instability. Until fundamental reforms address military dominance and institutional corruption, such cycles of protest and repression will likely continue, with each crisis more destabilizing than the last (Haqqani, 2023). The period's legacy may be demonstrating that Pakistan's traditional crisis management toolkit no longer suffices in the digital age.

Discussion

The 2021-2025 period marked an alarming acceleration of democratic erosion in Pakistan, revealing disturbing authoritarian trends that have fundamentally altered the country's political trajectory. The weaponization of state institutions reached unprecedented levels, with the Election Commission's arbitrary delays of constitutionally mandated elections and the judiciary's selective application of accountability measures creating what analysts term "legal authoritarianism" (Siddiq, 2023). This institutional decay was particularly evident in the mass trials of civilians in military courts following the May 9 protests, which effectively militarized the justice system while contravening both domestic constitutional provisions and international human rights law (Amnesty International, 2023). The digital sphere, once seen as a potential democratizing force, became a new battleground for control, with over 15 nationwide internet shutdowns in 2023 alone and sophisticated surveillance deployed against activists (Freedom House, 2024). These developments suggest Pakistan is transitioning from its traditional "hybrid regime" model toward a more overtly authoritarian system, where democratic institutions are maintained as facades while actual power is exercised through informal military-dominated networks (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The extreme political polarization that characterized this period has inflicted deep wounds on Pakistan's social fabric and national cohesion. What began as typical partisan competition

between PTI and PDM evolved into something more dangerous - a fundamental schism in perceptions of political legitimacy, where 61% of PTI supporters viewed the post-2022 government as entirely illegitimate (Gallup Pakistan, 2023). This divide permeated multiple dimensions of society: in universities, where student groups became violently divided; in workplaces, where political affiliations affected professional relationships; and even within families, with generational gaps in political allegiances causing domestic tensions (HRCP, 2023). The military's direct entanglement in this polarization, through its public denunciation of PTI following the May 9 events, marked a departure from its traditional posture as an "above politics" institution, with grave consequences for its perceived neutrality (Shah, 2023). This toxic environment has fostered what scholars call "affective polarization" - where political opponents view each other not merely as competitors, but as existential threats to the nation, making democratic compromise increasingly difficult (Zaidi, 2024).

Economic instability emerged as both consequence and catalyst of political turmoil, creating a vicious cycle that amplified dissent. The 2023 economic crisis, with inflation peaking at 38% and foreign reserves barely covering a month of imports, cannot be understood solely through macroeconomic indicators (World Bank, 2023). It represented the collapse of the implicit social contract in Pakistan - where citizens tolerated military influence in politics in exchange for basic economic stability. The dramatic 29% decline in foreign direct investment during 2022-23 directly correlated with political uncertainty, as international investors grew wary of the country's unpredictable governance (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023). At the societal level, economic distress transformed political grievances into matters of survival - where a 300% increase in bread prices made abstract debates about democracy intensely personal for ordinary citizens (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This economic dimension helps explain why traditional methods of protest suppression failed: when basic subsistence is at stake, populations become more willing to risk confrontation with authorities. The resulting emigration wave, particularly among youth and professionals, represents not just an economic brain drain but a profound vote of no confidence in Pakistan's future direction (Bureau of Emigration, 2023). Together, these factors suggest that Pakistan's crisis is not merely political or economic, but systemic - requiring comprehensive solutions that address the interconnected roots of instability.

Conclusion

The political instability and social unrest that engulfed Pakistan from 2021 to 2025 revealed deep structural flaws in the country's governance system, where democratic institutions remain vulnerable to manipulation by military and political elites. The ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022, followed by mass protests, violent crackdowns, and unprecedented attacks on military installations, demonstrated how quickly political disputes can escalate into full-blown crises when institutions fail to mediate conflict. The judiciary's politicized rulings, the Election Commission's delays, and the military's heavy-handed repression of dissent eroded public trust in the state, while economic collapse marked by hyperinflation and mass unemployment turned political grievances into existential struggles for ordinary citizens. What began as a power struggle among elites spiraled into a broader crisis of legitimacy, exposing how Pakistan's hybrid regime oscillating between democratic pretenses and authoritarian realities lacks the mechanisms to sustainably manage political competition. The youth-led digital resistance, though innovative in circumventing state censorship, also highlighted a dangerous generational divide, with younger Pakistanis increasingly disillusioned with both traditional politics and military dominance. Without

fundamental reforms to restore institutional integrity, reduce military interference, and address economic inequities, such cycles of instability will likely persist, each crisis more destabilizing than the last.

The events of this period underscore that Pakistan's political system is at a crossroads. The old playbook of suppressing dissent through coercion or co-option is becoming ineffective in an era of digital mobilization and heightened public awareness. The May 2023 protests, where civilians directly challenged military authority, signaled a potential shift in the public's willingness to confront once-untouchable institutions. Yet, the state's reliance on repression mass arrests, internet blackouts, and military trials has only deepened societal fractures, leaving little room for reconciliation. Meanwhile, the economic fallout from political chaos capital flight, brain drain, and investor distrust has created a vicious cycle where instability breeds further decline. If Pakistan is to break this pattern, it must move beyond superficial democratic rituals and address the root causes of its crises: unaccountable military influence, a compromised judiciary, and an electoral system that prioritizes elite interests over public welfare. The alternative continued polarization and institutional decay risks pushing the country toward irreversible fragmentation. The lessons of 2021–2025 are clear: without genuine democratic consolidation, Pakistan's future will remain hostage to the same cycles of unrest that have defined its past.

Key Recommendations

Institutional Reforms

Judicial Independence: Ensure merit-based appointments and limit political interference in judicial decisions.

Electoral Integrity: Strengthen the Election Commission with transparent processes to prevent manipulation.

Depoliticized Accountability: Reform anti-corruption bodies (e.g., NAB) to prevent weaponization against political opponents.

Media Freedom: Protect press freedom and regulate digital platforms without censorship.

Civil-Military Balance

Constitutional Clarity: Enforce legal limits on military involvement in politics and policy-making.

Parliamentary Oversight: Empower legislative committees to monitor defense budgets and security policies.

End Military Trials for Civilians: Restrict military courts to military personnel only.

Youth Engagement & Civic Participation

Civic Education: Integrate democratic values and constitutional rights into school curricula.

Political Inclusion: Create youth councils and internship programs in governance institutions.

Digital Literacy: Train young citizens in responsible social media use to counter disinformation.

Economic Stability & Social Equity

Inflation Control: Implement policies to stabilize food and fuel prices for low-income households.

Job Creation: Launch skill development programs and support entrepreneurship to reduce youth unemployment.

Anti-Poverty Measures: Expand social safety nets to alleviate economic desperation fueling unrest.

National Dialogue & Reconciliation

Inter-Party Consensus: Establish neutral platforms for political negotiations to reduce polarization.

Truth & Reconciliation: Investigate past political victimization to restore public trust.

Provincial Autonomy: Address regional grievances through fair resource distribution.

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