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# An Investigation into the Challenge of Institution-Building in Pakistan and its Impact on Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines Pakistan's inability to develop a strong, sustainable, and dynamic institutional framework that can not only effectively deal with societal issues but also provide a favourable environment for a functioning democratic system. Simply put, there exists a basic structural problem in Pakistan that hinders any meaningful progress towards achieving a highly desired goal—a strong and stable democratic polity. The situation is exacerbated by the existence of an institutional imbalance between major state institutions, i.e., the legislature, judiciary, executive, and the military-bureaucratic apparatus. All this has, in turn, led to the alienation of the smaller provinces, as they feel under-represented in key state institutions—that is, they are effectively excluded from the main decision-making bodies in Pakistan. Furthermore, there have also been governance issues in Pakistan, as state institutions have been consistently underperforming in providing public goods and services since 1947. This failure of state institutions has also provided an enabling environment for non-state actors, i.e., militant organisations, to get hold of some state territories and provide public services, such as administering swift justice and maintaining law and order. So, there is a need for holistic structural reforms in Pakistan—with the aim of putting in place a well-functioning democratic system whereby people can freely articulate their aspirations and demands, where governance issues are effectively addressed at all levels, and where democratic forces are in charge of state affairs. In terms of research methodology, this qualitative study is based both on primary sources (official documents, etc.) and secondary sources (books, articles, etc.).*



***Keywords:*** *institution-building, institutional imbalance, governance, democracy, civilian supremacy*


## Introduction

Pakistan has been facing the perennial challenge of institutional imbalance since 1947—the year of its inception. There has been a struggle going on between democratic and non-elected state institutions for power since the beginning. There are several reasons for this tug-of-war between institutions in Pakistan. Some scholars argue that organizational weakness and the feudal basis of the All-India Muslim League before partition are responsible for the weak democratic system and culture in Pakistan (Tudor, 2013; Jalal, 1990). Hamza Alavi identifies uneven institutional development during the colonial era, whereby non-representative state institutions became overdeveloped while democratic forces remained weak, as the root cause of post-partition institutional challenges in Pakistan (Alavi, 1972). Institutional imbalance, as discussed below, has proved to be an insurmountable challenge in putting the institutional order of the state on solid footing in Pakistan.

Before discussing the underlying causes of the failed state formation, institutional imbalance, political instability, worsening civil-military relations, reduced civilian sway, and decapitated judiciary in post-partition Pakistan, a brief overview of the introduction of the military, bureaucracy, and representative institutions by the British Empire will be helpful. The British employed shrewd diplomacy and deception as well as military force in their efforts to colonise India (Niaz, 2019). After taking over India, the British felt the need to put in place an institutional order to control its heterogeneous society. Among those institutions, the most important were the Central Superior Services and Indian Civil Services, which played a crucial role in maintaining the British control of the affairs of state and the smooth functioning of governmental machinery. The imperative of this system was evident in T. B Macaulay's "minutes on

education in India" on February 2, 1835:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees of fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great masses of the population (Bureau of Education, 1965).

As a result of such efforts, the British introduced a bureaucratic system in India. The bureaucratic structure replaced the previous uniaxial top-down authority with a multi-layered pattern of authority where state officials—especially at district level—could use discretionary powers. The second important feature of this new system was the substitution of the rule of the king—with religion as a source of legitimacy—with a legal-rational bureaucratic system (Waseem, 2007). The impersonal bureaucracy was tasked to perform functions such as maintaining law and order, revenue collection, and dispute resolution—to make sure that people are law-abiding and loyal to the British government (Ansari & Bajwa, 2019). In terms of composition, the higher officials of the bureaucracy came from Britain, but other officials were to a greater extent recruited from the local population (Waseem 2007).

Another institutional response to the growing Indian aspiration for power was the accommodation of the local population—in a highly selective manner though—in the British-introduced representative institutions. The government responded to radical elements by devising ways and means within the existing framework of the state. The Indian Council Act 1861 made provision for the administrative setup of India. It demarcated the power of the governor-general and his council, as the governor-general was vested with the authority to nominate members of his council—in addition to five members, three were to be appointed by the secretary of state with the approval of his respective council—and two by the Crown, one being a barrister and the other the commander-in-chief. The council was empowered to make, alter, amend or repeal any law and regulation related to India—subject to the assent of the governor-general (Khan, 2017). Indian representation was gradually increased through the Indian Council Act of 1892 and 1902, the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909, the Montague-Chelmsford reforms, the Govt of India Act 1919, and the 1935 Govt of India Act—also to alleviate public anger through political means and introduce a Westminster-style democracy.

Related to the military, initially, the East India Company relied on a small military force to protect its commercial interests and to avoid being economically overburdened. But a conflict with Aurangzeb Alamgir (1686-90) occurred when they tried to intimidate Shaista Khan, then governor of Bengal, to obtain permission to allow the company to trade across the empire and sent a fleet to bombard Chittagong and Madras. All this exposed the vulnerability of their army when Alamgir's army reduced their possession to Bombay and Madras. By 1689, a Mughal fleet blockaded Bombay by forcing the British forces to surrender in 1690 (Niaz, 2019). Subsequently, rivalry with the French East India Company under Dupleix necessitated the reorganisation and expansion of the military, including training Indian sepoys who were lured through attractive incentives like regular pay, pensions and family allowances. After the French defeat, the British imitated their policy of acquiring land to fund their expanded military, which ballooned from 3,000 in 1756 to 300,000 by 1857 and largely consisted of locals due to the hostile climate.

Post-rebellion military reforms led to a professional military, with recruitment made largely from northwest India. This professional army became the world's largest force

during the twentieth-century World Wars (Sandhu, 2011). The British policy was to keep the military away from politics, and thousands of troops were trained to imbibe a sense of professionalism, which would prevent any rupture during the time of crisis (Niaz, 2019). This professionalism left a significant imprint on the politics of post-partition Pakistan as the military became a key stakeholder in defining the contours of the political system. The military did try to obey their civilian masters in the early years, but the political class proved too inept to be obeyed by a disciplined military.

## Analysing the Causes of Democratic Backsliding in Pakistan

There is a widely held perception that Pakistan and India inherited the same institutional structure implanted by the British but Pakistan has failed to achieve a stable and vibrant democratic structure like India is a mistaken assumption. Ian Talbot has persuasively argued that Pakistan, especially West Pakistan, inherited the most sensitive and underdeveloped areas of British India, where security and maintenance of law and order were prioritised over the establishment of representative institutions (Talbot, 2012). David Gilmartin highlights that "a social order was established with the British crown seen as the centre of authority" (Gilmartin, 1988). The colonial government introduced a system of paternalistic authoritarianism in those areas where Punjab was given a dominant position over the NWFP (now KPK), Baluchistan, and Sindh, as Punjab provided the manpower—both to the military and civil bureaucracy (Waseem, 1997). Every fifth man in the province and every third man in Rawalpindi district was an ex-serviceman (Aiyer, 1995). The military was thus poised to play an important role in the politics of Pakistan.

In the first decade, the military acted as instructed by the civilian rulers. There was a two-pronged struggle going on in Pakistan. On the one hand, there was a tug-of-war for power in full swing between the democratic and non-democratic (civil-military bureaucracy); on the other, there was a struggle for power going on within the bureaucracy, i.e., between the civil and military bureaucracy. For the first struggle, there is evidence that the military played a politically significant role in the affairs of the state in Pakistan, as the army chief was a part of the federal cabinet (Jalal, 1990). By the end of the decade, it found itself at the helm of affairs in Pakistan. After staying at the helm for around eleven years, the military dictator Ayub Khan had to handover power to another general—Yahya Khan. Democracy returned to Pakistan after the 1970 elections, but the country was dismembered as a result of the civil war that arose out of the power struggle between politicians—with the army working behind the scenes (Nawaz, 2008). Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto became the new leader and stayed in power until 1977, when he was overthrown by another military dictator, Zia Ul Haq. He ruled for another eleven years, and he vanished from the scene only because he could not survive a plane crash. The decade of democracy in the 1990s ended with a military dictator in 1999. Democracy returned in 2008, but it also ushered in a new era of hybrid regimes in Pakistan—that continues to this day. For the second struggle, the military dominated all other state institutions, including the civil bureaucracy.

One can observe that an intense struggle for power—between democratic and non-democratic forces, on the one hand, and between the civil and military bureaucracies, on the other—got started soon after the death of Quaid-e-Azam and Liaqat Ali Khan. This institutional attrition kept Pakistan in the lowest category in every developmental index. Pakistan ranks 168 out of 193 on the Human Development Index (Hussain Z. , 2025). It was also the 2nd worst terrorism-hit nation in the Global Terrorism Index 2025. According to the World Bank's global poverty threshold, around 44.7 per cent of Pakistan's population live below the poverty line (Babakhel, 2025). These issues are

neither unusual nor unique, but their uniqueness lies in their persistence. These issues linger as state institutions are more interested in amassing power rather than focusing on governance—the provision of goods and services. The following section aims to trace the roots of these issues.

## The Role of the Muslim League and Bureaucracy: An Analysis

As discussed above, the uneven and asymmetrical development among the major state institutions of Pakistan (Alavi, 1990) contributed immensely to Pakistan's slide towards authoritarianism and dictatorship—often led by the military, which portrayed itself as the only institution possessing the capacity to protect the country. The founding fathers employed the two-nation theory—to achieve a separate homeland for the Muslims of India—but this idea did not get much traction in parts of West Pakistan, namely, NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Sindh, Punjab and Baluchistan (Talbot, 2012).

The lack of institutionalization of the League and its mass appeal—due to the feudal background of its leadership (Tudor, 2013)—is reflected in the figure of their membership in the areas now part of Pakistan. Low membership of the League points to its weak organisational structure and slow pace of political activities. For example, the membership of the League stood in Punjab at 150,000, whereas it was much lesser in Sindh with just 48,500. Factional fighting within the Frontier League prompted an inquiry by the All-India Committee of Action in June 1944, which admitted that "there was no organisation worth the name in the province" (Talbot, 2012). The leadership of Muslims was in the hands of titled men and landed gentry who were not courageous enough to sacrifice their selfish and material interests (Nomani, 1938). Low membership and patrician leadership went squarely against the League's claim that it was the only genuine representative party of the Muslims. Reliance of the League on the local elites rather than taking the party's message directly to the masses greatly undermined the party discipline.

Moreover, migrants, besides dominating the Muslim League, had also dominated the bureaucracy and military. They were aware that an open democratic system will end their hegemony due to the lack of a constituency from which a representative could be elected. They resorted to continuing the utilisation of executive power even after the father of the nation dismissed the NWFP provincial assembly after seven days of independence. The precedent set by the Quaid-e-Azam was followed by the seasoned bureaucrats and military officials elevated to high posts, such as Ghulam Muhammad and Iskandar Mirza, who dismissed provincial assemblies and the Constituent Assembly dominated by the local people in the 1950s and even abrogated the constitution of Pakistan, which operated only for two years. All this happened due to the fear that asserting the supremacy of the parliament would end the migrant-dominated setup maintained with the collaboration of the bureaucracy and military (Waseem, 2000).

Pakistan had failed to restructure the interim constitution—to take the governor-general's discretionary powers away and frame a constitution—while, on the other hand, India had been successful in both restricting the governor-general's power and making a constitution of their own within the first two years of its independence. Pakistan continued to rule the country through the 1935 Act, which had subordinated parliament to the Governor General and Governors. Consequently, non-elected state institutions became strong—at the expense of the civilian as well as democratic forces for dealing with issues.

## The Emergence of a Parallel State? Analysing the Military's Triumph over Other Institutions

The birth of Pakistan was a traumatic experience. There was an acute sense of insecurity, as Indian leadership had not accepted Pakistan from its heart. The sense of insecurity, which was caused by perceived threats from India, made security of the state the topmost priority of Pakistan's founding fathers. It was in this contest that the military, after the partition, emerged as a real stakeholder in shaping the politics of Pakistan. The top brass of the military, at the time of partition, was dominated by both *Mohajir* (migrants) and Punjabi. The migrants—lacking a constituency—opted for an executive-dominated state where power was centralised and ethnonational identities would be subsumed by an all-Pakistan-based national identity (Waseem, 2000).

The reason behind the military as a powerful actor in the decision-making process was the Pakistani elite's perceived threat of India in the backdrop of the protracted conflict in Kashmir. Kashmir's decision of accession with the Indian State flared anger among the Pakistan stakeholders, and they decided to send a group of tribal fighters to accede Kashmir forcefully (Nawaz, 2008). They partly succeeded in their mission and achieved the present Azad and Jammu Kashmir (AJK). But Pakistan's fear of India—that it would undo Pakistan—enhanced the role of the military in politics and thus kept the Bonapartist tendencies intact (Waseem, 2015).

To protect the state, the military prioritised the presidential form of government over the parliamentary; they conceived that the decentralisation of authority is harmful to the security of the state. Politically, the military has been following a uniaxial approach to politics—focusing on leadership at the top rather than mass participation in politics from below. A president equipped with enough power could lead the nation to its destiny. This vision of the military was materialised by Ayub Khan when he dismissed the civilian government, and the parliamentary form of government was replaced with a presidential one. This pattern was later followed by Yahya Khan and Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled the country from 1977 to 1988, and by Musharraf when he dismissed the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif and ruled the country from October 1999 to 2008 (Talbot, 2012).

Elected institutions have been consistently kept weak since 1947. The Ayub government had tried their best to keep the parliament weak by curtailing its powers; Zia renamed the National Assembly Majlis Shura (Advisory Committee) and lowered its status merely to a consultative body to serve the president (Waseem, 2011). A series of amendments were made to the constitution to empower the presidents to dissolve parliament; the president was used by the military in the 1990s to dismiss the civilian governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. The institutional imbalance between the military and parliament tilted in favour of unelected state institutions in Pakistan—with the military taking control of key internal and foreign policy issues.

To maintain the status quo where the military dominates every other institution, the military establishment opted for an indirect intervention in the day-to-day governance of the country. The institution (Army) has acquired the status of kingmaker, as no party can imagine gaining power without Army General Headquarters (GHQ) and intelligence agencies' sponsorship and support (Siddiqa, 2020). A political party that aims to contest elections cannot enter into the corridor of power without the military's support. The (s)election of Imran Khan as the prime minister of Pakistan in 2018—through a heavily rigged election—was the military's first experiment with a hybrid regime to ensure its grip on power. According to Ayesha Siddiqa, the military maintains its political control through the following courses of action: "first, it plays a role in nurturing political leaders; second, it influences the political environment by supporting

its own candidates; and third, it infiltrates political parties through their men at the local level as well as in Parliament" (Siddiqa, 2020). These are the strategies repeatedly adopted by successive military governments to keep the military at the centre of politics. All this led to failure—failure to achieve a stable, accountable, and inclusive democratic system in Pakistan where parliament was to reign supreme—which had deeply affected governance in the country.

## Governance Crisis: An Assessment

The politics of post-independence have been held hostage to institutional struggle for power since 1947—hence institutional failure—to address the social, economic, political, and security challenges faced by the people of Pakistan. Studies have revealed a direct correlation between good governance and institutional effectiveness (Husain, 2018). According to Muhammad Waseem, the state institutions' ineffectiveness and inability to be pervasive to govern every aspect of society, as a large part of social, cultural, educational and economic aspects remained outside the purview of state policy, and bringing every area of Pakistan into the mainstream legal-constitutional framework caused alienation between the centre and the provinces (Waseem, 2000).

Leaving those areas unadministered created a vacuum often filled by non-state actors and charitable groups tied to militant organisations to step in and fill service delivery roles, which the civilian institutions are unwilling or unable to serve (Kugelman, 2018), and wanted to impose its own version of governance different from the contemporary mainstream legal-political-constitutional administrative structure. The state's late response, which often vitiated security, repeatedly led to mass killing and public displacement. The state institutions' ambition to impose national identity from above in the shape of "official nationalism" (Ullah, 2023) in the backdrop of internal (sub-ethnic groups) and external (India) threats further complicated the process of national integration, a necessary instinct that drives to unity and harmony. For example, administering the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) through the "black law" of the Frontier Crimes Regulations until May 2018 led to the people's disenchantment and indifference towards the state (Waseem, 2011).

The civilian institution's fruitless struggle, muddled in ineffectiveness, to cope with the society's concerns complicated efforts to formulate and implement policies. As discussed above, the state institutions' exclusionary tendencies and their failure at the service-giving end precipitated military interventions, gave rise to Islamic militancy, resulting in deteriorating Pakistan's peace, and in turn led to both human and economic losses. This pattern further weakened the state's control over the legitimate means of violence while other non-state actors challenged and dislodged the state authority in the shape of *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan, weakening the economic backbone of the country. According to Kugelman, "These dynamics not only further marginalise civilian institutions—they also undermine the institution of democracy. In short, Pakistan's institutional failures have troubling economic, developmental, and political implications for state and society" (Kugelman, 2018).

However, various reasons have been cited by analysts for Pakistan's institutional struggle, ranging from the politicisation of civil services, which in turn resulted in institutions populated by mediocre and unqualified officials; military interventions followed by structural discontinuity and degradation of the civilian framework of governance; dependency on donor organisations; a low tax base; the political class's lack of interest in providing public welfare; and the utter neglect of needed institutional and governance reforms.

Analysts argue that institutions determine the fate of nations. Inclusive and pluralistic

institutions provide an opportunity for everyone to partake in the decision-making process. The problem with Pakistani institutions is that they are dominated by the political and economic elites belonging to one province that provide little space for other ethnic groups to have a say in the decision-making process. Exclusionary state building (Ullah, 2023), overdeveloped state institutions (Alavi, 1990), the imposition of "official nationalism", and the instrumentalisation of religion for political ends are some of the key obstacles to good governance in Pakistan (Ullah, 2023). Therefore, the restructuring of government institutions—with people at the centre of governance—is imperative, as it will revive public confidence in state institutions and ultimately lead to national integration.

To alleviate structural discontinuity and allow the state to have a functional democratic system, it is imperative for a state to fulfil the four credentials of a democratic system outlined by Myron Weiner. These credentials are competitive election, operational freedom for contenders of power, acceptance of results by the defeated side, and exercise of supreme power by the elected government.

## Conclusion

There has been a raging struggle for power between state institutions, on the one hand, and between democratic and non-democratic forces, on the other, since 1947. Protracted conflicts between state institutions—civil, military, and democratic—have caused political, economic, and security crises in Pakistan. The military and bureaucracy of Pakistan, as the dominant institutions of the state in the early years of independence, have left their authoritarian imprints on Pakistan's political system. Democratic forces (political parties and politicians) have done little to put an end to the military's interference in politics and/or to put a stop to the manipulation of religion for political ends since the state's inception. The scene for this state of affairs was set by the political behaviour of the Muslim League in the early years of Pakistan—with its employment of religion for politics—as it was feudal-led and under-represented in the areas that later became parts of Pakistan. The absence of well-organised political parties—coupled with the incompetence of the politician—provided an opportunity for non-elected state institutions to play a role in politics.

Another factor playing an important role in undermining the legitimacy and authority of the state is the clergy and the religiously motivated non-state actors. The role of ulema increased after partition, as they were active in the Pakistan movement. But the close association of religious political parties with the militant organisation, forged by the Afghan war in the 1980s, led to the emergence of a competitor for the state—militant organisations started to challenge the state's monopoly on violence. Hence, some of Pakistan's key challenges, i.e., institutional imbalance, centralisation of authority, bad governance, the state's drift towards military dictatorship, etc., are attributed to factors like the massacre at partition, the refugees' crisis, the organisationally weak Muslim League, and an acute sense of insecurity. All this badly affects governance—the provision of goods and services to people—in Pakistan. The government, therefore, needs to carry out holistic structural reforms—for institutional balance—and economic and political reforms—for meeting the needs and fulfilling aspirations of the people—for a democratic and prosperous Pakistan.

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