



Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 694
FEBRUARY 2024

Cause and Effect: The Factors that Make Pakistan's Military a Political Force

Sania Muneer and Saroj Aryal

Abstract

This issue brief assesses the enduring political influence of the military in Pakistan. It delves into the historical, social, and geopolitical factors that have propelled the military's rise in the nation's governance structure. The brief also examines the military-bureaucratic nexus and its role in perpetuating military dominance, and the implications of a weak civil society and its constrained ability to counterbalance military power.

In recent years, Pakistan's fragile democracy has grappled with an overbearing military, strained regional relationships, and repercussions from the growing rivalry between the US and China.¹ Amid domestic political turbulence and a deteriorating economy, the civilian government increasingly relied on a power-hungry military for stability and support.² Indeed, the domestic political rollercoaster underway since 2022 showcases the impact of the military's involvement in the country's politics, with then-Prime Minister Imran Khan's worsening relationship with the military eventually leading to his ouster and imprisonment.³ Khan's public clashes with the military chief regarding top military appointments and policy decisions and his poor political and economic management are said to have led to him losing the military's backing, which the opposition said had helped bring him to power in the 2018 general election.⁴

The February 2024 election further showcases the Pakistan military's involvement in the domestic political process. The confusion and disorganisation with which the results were announced have fueled widespread claims of vote rigging.⁵ The outcome of the polls indicates a sophisticated electioneering, and that the military likely shaped the elections.⁶ Despite the apparent dominance of Khan's political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the military's strategic orchestration prevented them from securing a two-thirds majority. Notably, the sidelining of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in favour of his brother Shahbaz Sharif, also a former prime minister and the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), strategically aligns with the military's interests, given the PML-N's history of challenging military authority, even more than Khan. By tactically undermining Nawaz's key allies and distributing provincial governments among seemingly favourable parties, the military will effectively maintain a grip on the political narrative while preserving the facade of democratic representation. This nuanced manipulation underscores the military's adeptness in navigating the complexities of Pakistani politics, ensuring its continued influence within the democratic framework.

Pakistan is deemed 'authoritarian' due to the pervasive influence of and interventions by its powerful military, which shapes and often controls the nation's political dynamics.⁷ Certain theories, such as modernisation^{a,8} and dependency theories,^{b,9} help explain the lack of socioeconomic development and the rise of authoritarianism in countries worldwide. Modernisation theory suggests that Pakistan's struggle with development is linked to entrenched

a Modernisation theory refers to a body of work that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a means of understanding economic and social development issues and developing policies to help poorer countries with their transitions.

b Dependency theory is a school of thought in contemporary social science that seeks to contribute to a better understanding of underdevelopment, an analysis of its causes, and, to a lesser extent, solutions to it.

traditional values, resistance to change, and inadequate educational progress. While the theory anticipates a transition towards democracy as a society modernises, Pakistan has experienced military rule, indicating deviations from the expected democratic trajectory. On the other hand, dependency theory suggests Pakistan's underdevelopment is attributable to its reliance on more economically powerful nations. The country has frequently sought foreign aid, particularly in times of economic distress, resulting in a dependency on external actors. This external dependency has created imbalances in power relations, limiting Pakistan's autonomy in shaping independent economic policies. In response to external pressures, especially economic challenges exacerbated by dependency, Pakistan has witnessed military interventions, justified as measures to maintain control and stability. The interplay between external reliance and authoritarian governance highlights a pattern where the need for stability in the face of economic challenges has, at times, led to the assertion of authoritarian control in Pakistan. Thus, through textbooks, popular Urdu media and the news media, military generals are often portrayed as epitomes of bravery and true representatives of Islam.¹⁰

The intertwining of military narratives (or that of security forces, such as Iran's morality police) and Islamic values is a distinct aspect of political and social discourse, reflecting the historical, cultural, and geopolitical influences that shape the perception of military leadership within an Islamic framework.^c Such narratives and portrayals have enabled military coups and given the armed forces the confidence to remove civilian governments when needed to fulfil their personal and institutional interests, with limited resistance from the masses in Islamic countries.¹¹ In Pakistan, the use of state-sponsored propaganda legitimises military coups and presents the armed forces as the sole defenders of the country, its ideology, and its people.¹² Pakistan, much like several other postcolonial countries, has an underdeveloped society and overdeveloped state.^{d,13} Consequently, this hampers the effectiveness of democratic processes, including political parties, elections, and constitution-making. However, the structural conditions alone, such as bureaucratic strength and centralised power, are not the sole drivers of sustained military involvement. The armed forces' popular legitimacy is significantly shaped by their portrayal as saviours and guardians of Islam, through a narrative that grants them public support and confidence to assert political dominance.

c Donald Eugene Smith has examined the connection between Sharia and authoritarianism, arguing that Sharia has tended to motivate people to forgo their critical thinking and right to rebel and teaches them to embrace obeying the ruler(s) and to accept authoritarianism. See: Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Development: An Analytical Study* (New York: Little Brown, 1970).

d A disproportionately powerful and centralised government, often influenced by military interventions, coexists with society facing challenges such as poverty, inadequate access to basic services, and limited economic opportunities.

This issue brief investigates the enduring and significant political influence of the military in Pakistan by assessing the historical, social, and geopolitical factors that have contributed to the armed forces' oversized role in the nation's governance structure.

“The interplay between external reliance and authoritarian governance highlights a pattern where the need for stability amid economic challenges has, at times, led to the assertion of authoritarian control in Pakistan. Thus, through textbooks, popular Urdu media and the news media, military generals are often portrayed as epitomes of bravery and true representatives of Islam.”

An Overview of Pakistan's Strategic Culture and Political System

Strategic culture is the collective set of beliefs, norms, values, and historical experiences of a ruling elite within a political entity, shaping their interpretation of security issues and guiding policy responses by providing a perceptual framework through which policymakers observe and decide on external security dynamics.¹⁴ Strategic culture establishes “pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences for states by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of actuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious.”¹⁵ In the postcolonial era, the intricate relationship between military institutions and political governance played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectories of newly independent nations.¹⁶ Pakistan is a case in point. This enduring issue—of the military wielding significant influence within the political sphere—reflects not only a historical legacy inherited from the colonial era but also encapsulates the evolving challenges and aspirations of an independent nation striving to establish its identity and stability.¹⁷

This colonial legacy is a prominent feature of Pakistan’s ‘strategic culture’ and sheds light on the profile and behaviour of its security policymakers. The disposition of Pakistan’s security leaders is moulded by factors such as historical experiences during the early years of independence, their assessment of the regional security environment, and their threat perceptions. This shapes their worldview, their interpretation of political and military developments, their perception of adversaries, and their policy options.¹⁸ As such, Pakistan’s strategic culture can be summarised as: “(a) An acute insecurity developed in the early years of independence due to troubled relations with India and problems with Afghanistan. (b) A strong distrust of India and a history of acrimonious Indo-Pakistani relations reinforced by the historical narratives of the pre-independence period and the troubled bilateral interaction in the post-independence period. (c) Aversion to an India-dominated regional power arrangement for South Asia. (d) An active search for security to maintain its independence in deciding about foreign policy options and domestic policies.¹⁹ (e) A close nexus between Islam and strategic thinking, leading to connections between Islamic militancy and foreign policy.”²⁰

The Pakistan military emphasises integrating Islamic principles with professionalism, hierarchy, discipline, and a sense of service pride as the fundamental tenets of its organisational structure. Military education and training programmes incorporate Islamic teachings, history (particularly

An Overview of Pakistan's Strategic Culture and Political System

significant Islamic battles), and notable Muslim commanders. Key Islamic concepts such as *shaheed* (martyr), *ghazi* (victorious), and *Jihad-e-fi-sibilallah* (holy war in the name of God) are underscored as major sources of inspiration for the Pakistan military in both peacetime and wartime.²¹ Given the close association of Islam with the establishment of Pakistan, its defence, particularly in relation to India, is portrayed by civilian and military leaders as the safeguarding of Islam itself. These notions and Islamic symbols were frequently invoked during the war of 1965 and 1971 to rally military personnel and garner popular support for war efforts.²²

Islamic conservatism within the military has surged since the 1970s, coinciding with a rise in the representation of officers hailing from middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, many of whom have strong conservative religious affiliations. Islamic conservatism gained further momentum in the 1980s due to several factors. During General Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977 to 1988) as president, there was a notable increase in the emphasis on Islam within the military. Facing a crisis of legitimacy, Zia's military regime invoked orthodox Islamic injunctions and mobilised orthodox Islamic groups to build support for his rule. This fits well with the changes in the orientation of the officers recruited in the 1970s and 1980s. The Zia regime endorsed and encouraged the public expression of religious convictions within the army and allowed certain orthodox religious groups to establish a presence within the military.²³

Additionally, the Afghan conflict (1979-1989) played a pivotal role in furthering Islamic conservatism among Pakistan Army personnel.²⁴ Many of them actively collaborated with Islamic parties and Afghan resistance factions engaged in combat against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. A significant number of Pakistan Army personnel, particularly those affiliated with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), believed that the lessons drawn from the Afghan experience could be applied in other contexts, and saw it as a potential means to counteract non-Muslim dominance over Muslim populations.²⁵

Pakistan's strategic culture has significantly influenced its security and foreign policy choices.²⁶ Key aspects of this strategic culture include advocating for a pluralistic power structure in South Asia, emphasising external security concerns, developing military capabilities to deter potential adversaries, allocating a significant portion of resources to defence, procuring weaponry from foreign sources, and employing diplomacy and alliance-building, especially with the US, to enhance its regional position. Additionally, Pakistan

An Overview of Pakistan's Strategic Culture and Political System

has pursued strategies such as openly declaring its nuclear status in response to India's nuclear tests and utilising Islamic militant groups to advance its foreign policy objectives. However, Pakistan's strategic decisions are not driven by its strategic culture alone, with factors like realism, professionalism, and organisational imperatives also playing a role; indeed, realism and organisational imperatives have influenced the Pakistani military's perspectives and decisions on numerous occasions.^e At times, one factor may conflict with the other, leading policymakers to make difficult choices, as was seen in the way Pakistan dealt with militant Islamic groups after the September 2001 US terror attacks. Although Pakistan had historically used such groups for its strategic goals, global pressure, especially regarding counterterrorism efforts, forced it to make difficult choices. For instance, the US's re-engagement after the 2001 attacks aligned, in a way, with the country's evolving strategic relationship with South Asia and the issue of democracy in the Muslim world. However, it collided with Pakistan's interest in favouring some terrorist groups with close ties to its military.²⁷ This highlights the struggle between its own established ways of handling security matters and the need to align with international expectations in the changing post-2001 landscape.²⁸

In the post-Zia period, from the late 1980s onwards, the character of military governance in Pakistan underwent a notable transformation, with the military transitioning towards a more indirect exercise of political influence, rather than direct involvement.²⁹ Indeed, Pakistan's political landscape has long been characterised by the military's prominent role, with civilian politicians vying for support while simultaneously critiquing or discreetly seeking assistance from the influential security establishment. Although some politicians have entered agreements with the army to safeguard their personal interests, the general populace in Pakistan has not been forgiving. Widespread dissatisfaction persists regarding the military's involvement in political affairs, posing a notable challenge within the context of Pakistan's political system.³⁰

Pakistan has a hybrid political culture. The military has played a prominent role in shaping political developments, sometimes directly taking control of the government and at other times exerting influence behind the scenes.³¹ This hybridity is evident in the institutionalisation of military influence through the National Security Council, where both civilian and military leaders contribute to

e The reference to 'realism' suggests that the Pakistani military, being a professional and disciplined institution, considers practical realities and challenges in its decision-making process. This could involve considering factors such as the current geopolitical situation, the actual capabilities and limitations of the military, and the immediate security concerns facing the nation. Pakistan's decision to seek US military assistance in the mid-1950s and the early 1980s can be explained with reference to the country's strategic culture as well as realism.

An Overview of Pakistan's Strategic Culture and Political System

decision-making on crucial national security policies. Additionally, intelligence agencies, most notably the ISI, have played a substantial role in domestic politics, blurring the lines between civilian and military domains. For instance, the military was said to have manipulated the 2018 general elections, with the military rulers justifying their interventions due to issues such as political instability, corruption, and mismanagement by civilian governments.³²

The military's influence extends across state and semi-governmental institutions, as well as the private sector, industry, agriculture, education, transportation, and communication spheres. Rather than taking direct control, the military's primary objective now appears to be safeguarding and enhancing its corporate interests to benefit economically by expanding its footprint across Pakistan's cities by increasing the number of defence housing societies.^{f,33} Notably, the Pakistan army owns 12 percent of the country's land, two-thirds of which is owned by senior military officers.³⁴

Despite having failed to annex Kashmir twice (in 1947 and 1965) and losing the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971, the Pakistan military has reaped many perks and privileges by projecting itself as the country's sole defender and genuine patriot. However, in recent years, Pakistani citizens have begun to question—and even resent—the extra-constitutional powers, perks, and privileges enjoyed by the armed forces.³⁵

“The military's influence in the political sphere reflects a historical colonial legacy and encapsulates the evolving challenges and aspirations of an independent nation striving to establish an identity and stability.”

^f Such areas are sought after by civilians due to their reputation for quality development, security, and modern amenities. While the primary purpose remains to cater to the housing needs of military personnel, the inclusion of civilians has widened the demographic served by these housing societies.

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

During the partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan, the military was tasked with the responsibility of safeguarding the nascent nation and ensuring internal security.³⁶ Consequently, Pakistan assumed the character of a 'security state' rather than a 'development state', meaning the nation's primary focus and resource allocation were disproportionately directed towards preserving national security and addressing security-related challenges, often at the expense of other facets of national development. Indeed, Pakistan has consistently allocated a significant portion of its resources to the military, surpassing allocations to sectors such as the economy, education, healthcare, and welfare.³⁷

In the immediate aftermath of independence, Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, sought US\$2 billion in military and financial aid from the US, with US\$170 million earmarked for the army, US\$75 million for the air force, US\$60 million for the navy, and US\$700 million each for industrial and agricultural development. In 1950, Pakistan's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, met US President Harry Truman to emphasise Islamabad's "geopolitical significance" to Washington. Pakistan's pursuit of US assistance, driven by concerns over perceived Soviet ambitions in the Arabian Sea region, was undeniably a strategic move.³⁸

The military's involvement in Pakistan's political landscape has manifested in various forms, including orchestrating coups, toppling civilian governments, and exercising indirect control over feeble administrations.³⁹ These interventions often transpired through collaboration with other influential actors, including the judiciary, civil bureaucracy, allied politicians, religious leaders, and elements within the corporate sector, collectively known as "the establishment"⁴⁰ in Pakistan. Concurrently, politicians readily ceded ground to the military due to their own limitations, resulting in the erosion of institutional boundaries.

A few political parties—such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the PML-N, and the PTI—dominate the domestic political landscape, allowing for greater manipulation by the military leadership to exert influence over the political system. The military has historically patronised certain political leaders to serve its interests and maintain control over decision-making processes. This manipulation not only affects the electoral landscape but also contributes to

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

the broader narrative of the military's political strength in Pakistan. Therefore, understanding the interplay between the military and political parties, especially in terms of patronage and election dynamics, is crucial to comprehending the unique political system in the country.

The armed forces' credibility and efficient professionalism have been demonstrated through successful counterterrorism operations, such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb, fostering public trust and thereby enhancing their political influence.⁸ The military's economic interests are reflected in its ownership of businesses and participation in infrastructure projects, like the Defense Housing Authority and the Frontier Works Organization.⁴¹ On the other hand, dubious interactions with the judiciary have impacted the perceived independence of the judiciary. "For most of Pakistan's eight-decade history, its courts were largely aligned with the country's powerful military. They gave three coups a legal stamp of approval, disqualified dozens of politicians who had fallen out of favor with the generals, and turned a blind eye to the disappearances of political dissidents."⁴² Lastly, the military's strategic positioning as a preferred partner for foreign powers is evident in alliances like those with the US, showcasing how international support contributes to its political standing.

Geopolitical considerations emphasise the significant role of the military in Pakistan's political landscape. In a region marked by enduring rivalries and persistent security challenges, Pakistan grapples with a complex array of threats and strategic imperatives. The military's role as the guardian of national security is consistently reinforced by these geopolitical realities, providing a rationale for its deep involvement in shaping foreign policy decisions and devising security strategies. Both civilian authorities and military officials assert that Pakistan has continuously experienced a state of emergency since its inception. They cite Indian animosity regarding the disputed Kashmir⁴³ region and Afghan irredentism as significant threats to Pakistan's territorial integrity.

The Pakistan military's control over the political system can be understood through six broad causes:

^g "Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Press Release after the Corps Commanders Meeting in Rawalpindi." A few days after the press release, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, in a speech in Hyderabad, also chastised the government for "bad governance." Dawn, November 14, 2015. See also Ahmad et al.

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

- **Weakness of Civilian Institutions**

Pakistan has experienced a recurring pattern of military intervention in its political landscape, often attributed to the perceived weakness of civilian institutions.⁴⁴ This phenomenon⁴⁵ can be understood through the prisms of ‘designed militarism’ (the positive and premeditated intent to intervene in domestic politics and to follow expansionist foreign policies) or ‘reactive militarism’ (the expansion of military power that results from the weakness of civilian institutions and the pressures of civilians to expand the military role). The intervention by General Mohammad Ayub Khan was designed militarism, that by Zia was reactive,⁴⁶ while the Musharraf regime was considered as premediated.^h

The military’s robust role is rooted in two legacies from its early years. First, there is a prevalent military perception that civilians lack the ability to establish a sustainable, functional government or manage state affairs effectively. This perception led to a self-identity within the military as the sole saviour of the nation, justifying a ‘doctrine of necessity’ for political intervention, especially in matters of leadership selection and internal or external security issues. The military, adopting a ‘self-help’ attitude, carved out reserved domains in public policies, such as engaging in its own business activities (what one scholar refers to as “milbus,” essentially “military capital that is used for the personal benefit of the military fraternity”⁴⁷), and pursuing a foreign policy independent from civilians, fostering direct ties with the US. This inadvertently granted the military autonomy over its organisational affairs. Second, recognising the impracticality of ruling the country indefinitely, the military aims to maintain influence in the decision-making process. The choice of non-elected civilian leadership to continue the colonial diarchic governmental system, comprising bureaucracy and the military as central pillars, has not only drawn the military into politics but has also laid the groundwork for the ‘Troika-system’.^{i,48} This power-sharing arrangement between soldiers and civilians became entrenched in Pakistani politics after 1972. The cumulative impact of these legacies

h The authors’ personal communications with civil and military bureaucrats reveal it to be one of designed militarism.

i Illustrates the power-sharing system between civilians and the military, embodied through the three most significant agents in the political system of Pakistan—the chief of army staff, the president, and the prime minister.

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

underscores the military's continuous involvement in politics, shaped by its perception of civilian institutional weakness.⁴⁹

Pakistan's electoral regime has been significantly impacted by a lack of civilian control, particularly evident before the 2008 elections. With the assistance of intelligence services, elections were heavily manipulated to secure outcomes that would guarantee the continued political involvement of the armed forces. To sway the polls, political parties faced substantial hindrances, including the manipulation of internal divisions, creation of new parties, pressure on individual candidates to withdraw, imposition of restrictions on electoral campaigning, and bias towards specific political parties.⁵⁰ Elected governments also experienced undermining through various means, such as facilitating votes of confidence via vote buying (horse-trading), leading to their ousting from power. Consequently, the development of a functional party system was impeded. The strategy of creating tension through 'divide and rule' among different political leaders and their parties not only resulted in 'increased factionalism' paralysing the parliamentary process, but also hindered the evolution of a constructive relationship between the opposition and the government. However, a positive shift occurred with the armed forces adopting a (self-imposed) neutral stance in the 2008 elections. This not only fostered a sense of civilian control over leadership selections but also facilitated free and fair elections, culminating in Pakistan's first grand coalition, including the two main civilian rivals, the PPP and PML-N. This shift contributed to institutional effectiveness in the legislative branch, exemplified by major political outcomes such as the Eighteenth Amendment of the Constitution.^j Another noteworthy step towards civilian oversight was the initiation of the first debate on the defence budget.⁵¹

j The Eighteenth Amendment, enacted in April 2010, reinstated the parliamentary nature of the Constitution, redefined the relationship between parliament and the judiciary by suggesting parliamentary involvement in high judicial appointments, and decentralised significant functions to the provincial governments. This shift in responsibility and authority set the stage for reevaluating roles among institutional actors in a contested space in the following years. For more, see. Muhammad Ahsan Rana, "Decentralization Experience in Pakistan: The 18th Constitutional Amendment," *Asian Journal of Management Cases*, 17(1) 61–84, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0972820119892720>; National Assembly of Pakistan, https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1302138356_934.pdf

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

- **Fragile Civil-Military Relationship**

Fragility in civil-military relations persists due to the non-linear nature of the democratisation process in the country.⁵² There is no clear demarcation in the transition from a definite end of an authoritarian era to the beginning of an uninterrupted stabilisation and consolidation of democracy. Instead, political development is characterised by a sequence of transitions between democratic and military or semi-military regimes. Following an initial phase of bureaucracy-military domination (1947-1972), the country experienced three attempts at democratisation. However, each of these democratisation phases can be interpreted as a response to military rule, giving rise not only to nationally elected leaders (such as Z.A. Bhutto) but also political parties (such as the PPP or religious political parties).⁵³ Notably, while the democratic transitions were initiated and facilitated by military interventions, these phases were also concurrently shaped and limited by military influence. A crucial factor contributing to this paradox is the inability of civilians (non-elected individuals during the initial years and later elected officials) to institutionalise civilian control over the armed forces. This reality hampers the quality of democracy during its various phases, impacting multiple dimensions of democratic governance. The military has, by and large, not provided a “long term nation building strategy to forge the country as a cohesive and stable whole”⁵⁴

- **Credibility and Efficient Professionalism of Armed Forces**

Pakistan's military has consistently maintained a professional and disciplined profile since the country's inception. Over time, as its powers strengthened, the military developed an aversion to interference through civilian rulers in the day-to-day affairs and administration of the government.⁵⁵ Notably, many army chiefs, including Ayub and Zia, served extended terms, and their imposition of martial law faced limited opposition from civilian rulers. At the same time, civilian leaders also could not establish any robust democratic structures, allowing the military's influence to persist.

Ayub and Zia, in particular, played pivotal roles in shaping the military's relationship with political governance. Their prolonged tenures and martial law impositions went largely unquestioned by civilian authorities, contributing to a pattern of military interference in political affairs. The military, seeking to consolidate power, manipulated political forces through executive orders and decrees, favouring civilian leaders who aligned with their interests. This

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

relationship benefited both sides, but the military's hold over political power has come in the way of the proper decentralisation of authority.⁵⁶

In the post-Zia era, starting from the late 1980s, a shift occurred in the nature of military rule in the country. The military began exercising political influence more indirectly, adopting a strategy of 'soft intervention' alongside members of the ISI. This approach marked a distinct form of hybrid governance, where military generals engaged in bargaining with civilian leaders on policy issues rather than initiating direct interventions.⁵⁷ However, the strained nature of this interaction and its long-term durability remained questionable, characterising the evolving dynamics between the military and civilian leaders as a form of 'hybrid government'.

- **Military's Economic Interests**

Pakistan's early economic growth could be attributed to the fact that "the Pakistani military government has shown a great deal of initiative in economic management, and the central ministries are run by civilian experts and professionals who have been given considerable autonomy."⁵⁸ Indeed, the military's "omnipresence" in the public and private sectors "ensures an important role for the military in the state and society even if the generals do not directly control the levers of power".⁵⁹

The nexus between a weak economy and the increased likelihood of a coup d'état is underscored by the argument that military officers—through education, training, and exposure to new ideas—tend to be more progressive than other societal segments.⁶⁰ This progressive outlook often prompts the military to seek to modernise the state's social and economic fabric when faced with an inefficient or corrupt ruling elite.⁶¹

In Pakistan, the military has effectively utilised its influence over the state to augment its economic power.⁶² Its involvement in "industry, commerce, and business," enabled the military to develop a "stake in government policies and industrial and commercial strategies".⁶³ This involvement, coupled with the establishing of the army's welfare and charity system,⁶⁴ not only secures a significant stake for the Pakistani military in the economy but also grants it a degree of financial independence from the government, particularly concerning welfare, pensions, and trusts. These external revenue sources are what comprise "milbus".⁶⁵ This substantial economic power positions the military as a dominant player in both the private and public sectors.⁶⁶

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

The pursuit of economic autonomy has further exacerbated the civil-military imbalance, with the military initiating industrial and housing projects in the 1950s and 1960s for personal gain and profitmaking (leading to the emergence of 'milbus' that bolstered its political influence).⁶⁷ Recognising and addressing the military's involvement in corporate projects is crucial to curb its political interference.⁶⁸

- **Judiciary's Dubious Role**

The military has often sought the judiciary's endorsement to legitimise its actions, leveraging the unity within the broader 'establishment' during times of crisis. However, the current landscape signals a departure from this established pattern, as superior courts increasingly adopt an independent stance. The once-reliable support from the judiciary can no longer be taken for granted by the military. Concurrently, the military has initiated efforts to undermine the court and its rulings, spotlighting the dysfunctional relations among senior judges.⁶⁹

The political scenario involving the PTI and Khan reflects the conflict within the establishment itself. This dynamic has revealed a redefined role of the judiciary, influencing how the military engages in politics in Pakistan and challenging previous assumptions about the judiciary's predictable alignment with military interests. The shifting nature of alliances within key institutions indicates the complex interplay shaping the trajectory of military involvement in the country's political landscape.⁷⁰

Indeed, a series of events in 2023 that empowered military courts for civil prosecution have crippled the judiciary system in Pakistan. Khan has been serving a prison sentence for corruption, and authorities have cracked down on the PTI and its supporters, sending many to military courts for trial.⁷¹ The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Bill 2023 grants full legal status to the military's vast business empire, criminalises criticism of the armed forces, and authorises them to "carry out activities related to national development and advancement of national or strategic interests". The Official Secrets (Amendment) Bill 2023 gives security agencies unlimited discretion to arrest anyone they believe poses a threat. "Approaches" to military installations and offices, including intrusions and attacks, are prohibited, and suspects can face trial in military courts.⁷²

Deconstructing the Pakistan Military's Involvement in Politics

- **Military a Preferred Partner for Foreign Powers**

A common feature emphasised by all military regimes in Pakistan was extremely good relations with the US. This is perhaps because military takeovers in Pakistan accompanied a resurgence in the country's geopolitical significance in world politics, making Pakistan a 'frontline' state.^k This explains the convergence of its interests and security policies vis-à-vis the US.⁷³

Pakistan's elected leaders want to encourage positive, multifaceted engagement with regional countries and major global powers, particularly through trade and economic cooperation. However, they have little influence over the formation of foreign policy because of the military's powerful nature.⁷⁴ As a result, whenever a diplomatic challenge arises, the civilian apparatus typically takes a hands-off approach. At the same time, the military refuses to budge from its hardened external security approach, preferring to build relations solely on security concerns, ignoring economic and political issues. Consequently, foreign powers who have a security interest in the region end up having a robust relationship with the military rather than with the civilian government.

“Since independence, Pakistan has assumed the character of a ‘security state’ rather than a ‘development state’, meaning the nation’s primary focus and resource allocation were disproportionately directed towards preserving national security and addressing security-related challenges.”

^k Pakistan has often been referred to as a "frontline state" due to its strategic geographical location and its involvement in critical regional and global affairs. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, Pakistan's proximity to conflict zones has made it a key player in addressing regional security challenges. During the Cold War, Pakistan earned the designation as a frontline state in the context of the US-Soviet rivalry, particularly for its pivotal role in supporting the Afghan resistance against Soviet forces. In the post-September 2001 era, Pakistan has maintained its frontline status in the global war on terror, collaborating closely with the US and its allies in counterterrorism efforts. Additionally, concerns about nuclear proliferation, ongoing regional conflicts such as the India-Pakistan rivalry and the situation in Afghanistan, as well as its economic and trade significance, contribute to Pakistan's multifaceted strategic importance in international and regional geopolitics.

The weakness of political institutions and leadership in Pakistan has spurred a reliance on military solutions for political disputes. The persistent interference by the military in civilian governance has hindered the nation's ability to establish stable democratic practices. Since the country's inception, the military has consistently sought pliable civilian leaders who could win elections and execute its preferred domestic and foreign policies while remaining subservient to their influence.

Although the military has historically maintained cohesion and prevented the complete collapse of the state during previous crises, reported emerging differences within its ranks could now undermine its capacity to stabilise crisis situations. The erosion of public trust in the military threatens to exacerbate instability and social unrest, leaving external partners uncertain about who wields authority.⁷⁵ Diminished public support not only tarnishes the military's prestige but also impedes its ability to achieve operational objectives and safeguard institutional interests, especially in a region rife with challenges, with the military engaged in ongoing counter-terrorism operations.

Resolving the current impasse will be a complex endeavour due to deep-seated mistrust and entrenched positions on all sides. The absence of a credible conflict resolution mechanism within the country further complicates matters. Both the military and the Supreme Court, traditionally viewed as arbiters in times of crisis, have grappled with controversies and internal divisions, diminishing their credibility. Additionally, parliament, ideally a platform for dispute resolution, may also be further weakened by the absence of a credible opposition in the National Assembly. To chart a path towards a stable and prosperous future, it is imperative that the military disengages from active involvement in politics and strictly adheres to its constitutional role of safeguarding the country. Such a step will not only restore political stability but also enhance the military's standing in the eyes of the public. Only through a concerted effort to rebuild trust, embrace democratic principles, and address underlying issues can Pakistan hope to escape the cycle of crises and pave the way for a more stable and promising future. It is plausible that the supremacy of the military as an institution may undergo transformation. The ultimate solution will be restoring a balance or

Conclusion

equilibrium between the country's main institutions, emphasising the need to strengthen political institutions and promote effective leadership.

Pakistan faces significant challenges on the political and economic fronts, exacerbated by its nuclear status and regional instability. The potential for domestic instability is heightened by the need for urgent economic reforms, including negotiations with the IMF to manage its substantial debt obligations. The timely formation of a government committed to fiscal discipline and capable economic management will be crucial in preserving recent economic stability and securing necessary international support. [ORF](#)

Sania Muneer is a postdoctoral fellow at SOAS University of London.

Saroj Kumar Aryal is a Researcher at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies University of Warsaw Poland.

- 1 Victoria Schofield “Pakistan: 2011”, *The Round Table* 623-628, (2011), DOI:10.1080/00358533.2011.633376 ; Kunal Mukherjee, “Military governments, the ISI and political hybridity in contemporary Pakistan : from independence to Musharraf,” *Journal of Intelligence History*, 16 no. 2 (2017): pp. 172-193.
- 2 Ayesha Siddiq, "Pakistan's Hybrid 'Civilian–Military' Government Weakens Democracy," *East Asia Forum*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/01/21/pakistans-hybrid-civilian-military-government-weakens-democracy/>.
- 3 Hamid Mir, “Dirty Game: Untold Story of Imran Khan and Gen Bajwa’s Love-Hate Relationship: Opinion,” *India Today*, August 1, 2023, www.indiatoday.in/opinion-columns/story/dirty-game-untold-story-of-imran-khan-gen-qamar-javed-bajwa-love-hate-relationship-2319003-2023-01-09.
- 4 Cyril Almeida, “What Led to Leader Imran Khan’s Downfall in Pakistan?” *Al Jazeera*, 10 April 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/9/analysis-end-of-imran-khans-term.
- 5 “Pakistan Official Admits Involvement in Rigging Election Results,” *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2024, www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/17/pakistan-official-admits-involvement-in-rigging-election-results.
- 6 “Imran Khan Claims Victory in Pakistan Poll but Military Might Have Final Say,” *Guardian*, 10 February 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/10/imran-khan-claims-victory-in-pakistan-poll-but-military-might-have-final-say.
- 7 Sumit Ganguly and Christine Fair, “The Structural Origins of Authoritarianism in Pakistan”, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 51(1) (2013): 122-42.
- 8 Adam Przeworski, “Modernization: Theories and Facts” in *Political Development and Social Change*, ed. Jennifer Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 112-135.
- 9 Young Namkoong, "Dependency Theory: Concepts, Classifications, and Criticisms," *International Area Studies Review* 2 (1) (1999): 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/223386599900200106>
- 10 “Islam and Democracy,” *United States Institute of Peace*, September 2022, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr93.pdf>
- 11 Ziaul Haque Sheikh and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, “Military, Authoritarianism and Islam: A Comparative Analysis of Bangladesh and Pakistan,” *Politics and Religion*. 13(2) (2020): 333-360. doi:10.1017/S1755048319000440
- 12 Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 13 Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh," *New Left Review*, 74 (1) (1972): 4.
- 14 Hasan Askari Rizvi, “Pakistan’s Strategic Culture,” In *South Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances And Alliances*, ed. Michael R. Chambers, (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2002), pp. 305–28.

- 15 Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19 (4) (1995): 46.
- 16 Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh" in *South Asian Politics and Society*, ed. Sarah Johnson (New York: ABC Publishers, 1985), 45-67.
- 17 Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 38; Muhammad Ayub Khan, *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 19.
- 18 Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy," *International Studies Review* 4 (3) (2002): 87-113.
- 19 Samuel Martin Burke, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 55.
- 20 Rizvi, *Pakistan's Strategic Culture*; Hasan Askari Rizvi, *Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment: A Study of Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martins, 1993), pp. 21; Hasan Askari Rizvi, "Pakistani Threat Perception and Weapons Procurement" in *The Diffusion of Advanced Weaponry: Technologies, Regional Implications, and Responses*, ed. Thomas Wander, Eric H. Arnett, and Paul J. Bracken (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1994), pp. 197.
- 21 Rizvi, *Pakistan's Strategic Culture*
- 22 Stephen P. Rosen, "Military Effectiveness," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 5-31.
- 23 Rizvi, *Pakistan's Strategic Culture*
- 24 Mary Anne Weaver, *Pakistan: In the Shadow of Jihad and Afghanistan* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).
- 25 Feroz Hassan Khan, "Rough Neighbors: Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Strategic Insights* 2, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/jan03/southAsia.asp>.
- 26 Mahammad Fahim Khan et al., "Shifting Sands: Pakistan's Strategic Culture Amidst Regional and Global Flux." *Russian Law Journal*, 11 no. 12 (2023).
- 27 Touqir Hussain, "U.S.-Pakistan Engagement the War on Terrorism and Beyond." *United States Institute of Peace, Special Issue*, Aug. 2005, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr145.pdf.
- 28 Leon T. Hadar, "Pakistan in America's War against Terrorism: Strategic Ally or Unreliable Client?" *Policy Analysis* (Cato Institute) no. 436, May 8, 2002, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa436.pdf>; See also Alfred Stepan and Agil Shah, "Pakistan's Real Bulwark," *Washington Post*, May 5, 2004.
- 29 Hasan Askari Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).
- 30 Nazeer Javeria and Aneela Naqvi, "Image of Pakistan Armed Forces Portrayed by the News TV Channels: A Comparative Study of Public Perception of Two Metropolitan Cities," *Global Multimedia Review*, 3 no. 1 (2020): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.31703/gmr>.

- 31 Harold Trinukunas, "Crafting Civilian Control in Emerging Democracies: Argentina and Venezuela," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, 42, no.3, (2010).
- 32 Ishan Tharoor, "Pakistan's Military Has Its Fingerprints All over the Elections," *The Washington Post*, 25 July 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/07/25/pakistans-military-has-its-fingerprints-all-over-the-elections/.
- 33 Irfan Husain, "Lust for Land," *Dawn*, August 27, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1280186>
- 34 Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 35 Nilesh Kunwar, "Pakistan's 'Biggest Land Grabber'," *Eurasia Review*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/03052021-pakistans-biggest-land-grabber-oped/>
- 36 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 3-7.
- 37 "Social Spending in South Asia—An Overview of Government Expenditure on Health, Education and Social Assistance," UNICEF, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/10016/file/Social%20spending%20in%20South%20Asia.pdf>
- 38 "What has America done for Pakistan?" *Dawn*, July 13, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/643731/what-has-america-done-for-pakistan>.
- 39 Veena Kukreja, *Civil-Military Relations in South Asia: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 257.
- 40 Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*
- 41 Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*
- 42 "Pakistan's Courts Face a Challenge: Defying the Military," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/31/world/asia/pakistan-courts-challenge-military.html>
- 43 Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).
- 44 Louis D Hayes, *Politics in Pakistan: The Struggle for Legitimacy*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 1-18.
- 45 Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); John J. Maresca, vice president of international relations, Unocal Corporation, in U.S. House of Representatives, *U.S. Interests in the Central Asian Republics: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on International Relations*, 105th Congress, 2nd session, 12 February 1998, <http://www.chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/pol/wtc/maresca98.html> ; Shameem Akhtar, "What Next in Afghanistan?," *Dawn*, August 13, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640427>.

- 46 Siegfried O. Wolf, "Civilian Control and Democratic Transition: Pakistan's Unequal Equation," *Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU)*, April 2013, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/psru/PSRUreport2withPGNnos.pdf>.
- 47 Siddiq, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*
- 48 Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military & Politics in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2009); Veena Kukreja, *Contemporary Pakistan: Political Processes, Conflict and Crises* (New Delhi, Sage Publication, 2009).
- 49 Wolf, "Civilian control and democratic transition: Pakistan's unequal equation"
- 50 Wolf, "Civilian control and democratic transition: Pakistan's unequal equation"
- 51 Wolf, "Civilian control and democratic transition: Pakistan's unequal equation"
- 52 Abdul Shakoor Khakwani, "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: The Case of the Recent Military Intervention (October 12, 1999) and Its Implications for Pakistan's Security Milieu," *ACDIS: Occasional Paper, University of Illinois*, May 2003: pp.23.
- 53 Shafqat Saeed, *Civil-Military relations in Pakistan: From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Benazir Bhutto*. (Boulder Westview Press, 1997), pp. 256
- 54 Shaun Gregory and James Revill, "The Role of the Military in the Cohesion and Stability of Pakistan," *Contemporary South Asia* 16 no. 1 (2008): 39-61.
- 55 Kunal Mukherjee, "The Military, ISI and 'Hybrid' Governments in Pakistan: From Independence to Musharraf," Lancaster EPrints, <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/85636/2/ISI.pdf>.
- 56 Khurshid Ahmad, "Pakistan: Vision and Reality, Past and Future," *The Muslim World*, 96 no. 2 (2006) 363-79.
- 57 Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan*, pp.2.
- 58 Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 155-56.
- 59 Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan*, pp. 233.
- 60 Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) pp.201
- 61 Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*
- 62 Amina Ibrahim, "The Economic Factors of Pakistan's Military Coups." *LSE Working Paper Series*, 2009, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/Dissertation/Prizewinning-Dissertations/PWD-2007/WP92.pdf>
- 63 Kukreja, *Contemporary Pakistan*
- 64 Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan*, pp. 236-237.

- 65 Siddiq, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*
- 66 Siddiq, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*
- 67 Siddiq, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*
- 68 Mazhar Aziz, *Military Control in Pakistan: The Parallel State* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp.45.
- 69 Baqir Sajjad, "Pakistan At a Dangerous Crossroads," *Wilson Center*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/pakistan-dangerous-crossroads>.
- 70 Sajjad, "Pakistan At a Dangerous Crossroads"
- 71 Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Meer Baloch Shah, "Imran Khan: Former Pakistan Prime Minister Sentenced to Three Years in Jail," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/05/former-pakistan-prime-minister-imran-khan-jailed-for-three-years.
- 72 Salman Rafi Sheikh, "Pakistan's Military Can Now Legally Do Whatever It Wants," *Nikkei Asia*, August 23, 2023, asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Pakistan-s-military-can-now-legally-do-whatever-it-wants.
- 73 Khakwani, "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan"
- 74 Deedar Hussain Samejo, "Why Pakistan's Foreign Policy Is so Confused," *The Diplomat*, August 13, 2016, thediplomat.com/2016/08/why-pakistans-foreign-policy-is-so-confused/.
- 75 Sajjad, "Pakistan at a Dangerous Crossroads"



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005

E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org

Website: www.orfonline.org