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## Evolution and Role of Political Parties in Pakistan's Democratic Development

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1160>

### Abstract

This study examines the historical evolution, structural characteristics, and political functions of political parties in Pakistan within the broader context of democratic development. Political parties play a central role in representative democracies as vehicles for political participation, policy formulation, and governance. However, Pakistan's political trajectory reveals persistent institutional fragility, characterized by weak party structures, dynastic leadership, and recurring military interventions. Employing a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, this study synthesizes insights from scholarly literature, historical records, government reports, and party documents to explore how political parties have influenced Pakistan's democratic evolution. The analysis identifies key patterns in party politics, including personalization, patronage, and elite dominance, while highlighting structural challenges such as military interference, weak internal democracy, and ethnic fragmentation. Findings suggest that while political parties remain essential to Pakistan's democratic continuity, their limited institutionalization constrains the consolidation of democratic norms. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for internal reforms, policy coherence, and strengthened party institutionalization to enable sustainable democratic development.

**Keywords:** Political Parties, Pakistan, Democracy, Institutionalization, Dynastic Politics, Governance, Civil-Military Relations.

### Introduction

Since its establishment in 1947, Pakistan's political landscape has been marked by instability, oscillating between civilian and military rule, thereby impeding the maturation of its democratic institutions. Political parties, central to any democratic polity, have historically struggled to function as vehicles for effective representation, accountability, and policymaking. In Pakistan, these entities have been both products and victims of systemic weaknesses—operating within a polity dominated by elite networks, personalized leadership, and recurrent authoritarian interventions. As Shafqat (1998) observes, the oscillation between democracy and military rule has prevented the institutional consolidation of political parties, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation and fragmentation.

Political parties are expected to aggregate public interests, provide ideological guidance, and facilitate citizen participation in governance. However, in Pakistan, this normative expectation has rarely translated into practice. Waseem (2006) argues that most political parties operate as personality-centered organizations with limited ideological coherence and weak mechanisms

for internal democracy. The absence of institutionalized structures has fostered a culture of patronage and loyalty over merit, where leadership positions are often inherited rather than earned through participatory processes. This trend has eroded public confidence in democratic institutions and marginalized emerging leaders and reformist voices.

The evolution of political parties in Pakistan can be traced through several distinct phases. Initially, the Muslim League—instrumental in the independence movement—failed to adapt to post-independence governance, leaving a vacuum that was gradually filled by new political formations such as the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and various factions of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Ziring (1997) highlights that the post-colonial state's bureaucratic and military dominance curtailed the organic growth of civilian parties. The PPP's rise in the 1970s under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto introduced populist rhetoric and mass mobilization, yet it too succumbed to authoritarian tendencies and dynastic succession. Subsequent decades witnessed recurrent military interventions that restructured party politics to suit the strategic interests of non-elected institutions.

Military interference has profoundly shaped Pakistan's political development. From Ayub Khan's "Basic Democracies" system to Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies and Musharraf's creation of the PML-Q, each regime redefined political competition by co-opting or suppressing parties (Rizvi, 2000). Consequently, civilian governments often function under the shadow of military influence, constraining their autonomy. These interventions have fostered a fragmented political culture where survival often depends on proximity to power rather than public service or ideological commitment.

This article aims to critically examine the evolution and contemporary role of political parties in shaping Pakistan's democratic trajectory. It explores how party structures, leadership dynamics, and institutional interactions have influenced democratic governance. Employing a qualitative methodology, it draws upon secondary literature and documentary sources to identify key trends, challenges, and pathways toward reform. The study's overarching objective is to contribute to the understanding of how political parties can transition from personalized entities into institutionalized actors capable of sustaining democratic consolidation.

## **Literature Review**

Political parties constitute the foundation of democratic governance, serving as instruments of representation, policy formulation, and accountability (Huntington, 1968). In mature democracies, institutionalized parties mediate between citizens and the state, providing structured avenues for participation and interest aggregation. In Pakistan, however, the trajectory of party development has been hindered by historical, structural, and cultural factors. Repeated military interventions have disrupted the institutional evolution of political parties, stunting their ability to function as autonomous agents of democracy. Shafqat (1998) contends that each period of military rule—whether under Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, or Pervez Musharraf—reconfigured political competition through mechanisms of control, co-optation, or suppression. These cycles of authoritarian interruption prevented the organic development of political institutions, creating a dependence on undemocratic actors. As a result, political pluralism remains fragile, and parties are often compelled to navigate a political landscape skewed in favor of military and bureaucratic elites.

The personalization of politics represents another major impediment to democratic consolidation. Waseem (2006) emphasizes that political parties in Pakistan have evolved as personality-based organizations rather than programmatic institutions. Leadership is often dynastic, with authority concentrated in elite families such as the Bhuttos, Sharifs, and, more recently, the Khans. This concentration of power discourages internal contestation and perpetuates hierarchies that marginalize grassroots participation. Afzal (2019) further highlights that dynastic politics undermines party legitimacy by reducing opportunities for merit-based leadership and limiting innovation in political thought and practice.

Historically, the failure of the Muslim League to institutionalize itself after independence created a vacuum that facilitated elite dominance (Ziring, 1997). The bureaucratic and military establishment capitalized on this weakness, consolidating authority through repeated interventions in civilian politics. Rizvi (2000) elaborates that the military deliberately engineered political alliances to sustain its dominance, as exemplified by the formation of the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) in the late 1980s. Such manipulation fragmented the political landscape, weakening party cohesion and eroding public trust in electoral processes.

The absence of coherent ideological commitments further distinguishes Pakistan's party system from those in consolidated democracies. Nasreen and Younas (2013) note that party manifestos often lack substantive policy detail and rarely serve as frameworks for governance. Manifestos are typically rhetorical instruments designed to attract voters rather than articulate actionable policy agendas. This disconnection between electoral promises and governance outcomes reinforces public disillusionment and fosters cynicism.

The persistence of clientelism and patronage has further distorted democratic practices. Siddiq (2007) and Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) explain that in Pakistan's political economy, patron-client networks dominate electoral mobilization. Politicians exchange favors, jobs, and contracts for political support, transforming politics into a transactional enterprise. This system undermines meritocratic governance and institutional accountability while deepening socioeconomic inequalities.

The media, while acting as a key channel for political communication, has often amplified polarization. Malik (2018) observes that sensationalist reporting and elite-centric narratives dominate political coverage, marginalizing substantive policy debate. Consequently, public discourse revolves around scandals and personalities rather than governance issues, weakening democratic deliberation.

Finally, scholars such as Cheema, Javid, and Naseer (2013) and Adeney (2015) emphasize the intersection of local governance and ethnicity with national politics. While decentralization can foster grassroots democracy, Pakistani parties have historically resisted empowering local bodies to maintain centralized control. Similarly, ethnic mobilization, though representing marginalized groups, has often fragmented the polity, limiting cross-regional cooperation and national consensus-building.

Taken together, this literature underscores that Pakistan's democratic fragility stems not only from external interventions but also from internal deficiencies within political parties—ranging from dynastic leadership and patronage to weak ideological coherence and institutional fragility.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How have political parties evolved since the inception of Pakistan in 1947?
2. What role do political parties play in shaping democratic governance in Pakistan?
3. What structural challenges hinder the effective functioning of political parties in democratic consolidation?

### **Research Objectives:**

- To trace the historical evolution of Pakistan's political parties and their institutional development.
- To analyze the internal structures, leadership patterns, and ideological orientations of major parties.
- To examine the impact of military interventions, clientelism, and dynastic politics on democratic consolidation.
- To identify reforms necessary for strengthening political parties as agents of democratic governance.

## **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based exclusively on the analysis of secondary data. The study synthesizes information from academic literature, historical accounts, government documents, party manifestos, and media reports to develop a comprehensive understanding of how political parties have evolved and influenced Pakistan's democratic development. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to exploring complex socio-political phenomena, enabling contextual and interpretive depth rather than statistical generalization. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns in party organization, leadership behavior, and state-society interactions. Sources include the works of leading scholars such as Shafqat (1998), Waseem (2006), Rizvi (2000), and Jalal (1995), among others, whose research provides empirical and theoretical grounding. This secondary analysis approach allows for cross-validation of findings and the triangulation of perspectives from multiple disciplines, including political science, history, and governance studies. By relying on documented evidence rather than primary fieldwork, the study maintains analytical rigor while situating Pakistan's party politics within broader theoretical frameworks of institutionalism and democratic consolidation.

## **Findings**

The qualitative analysis of secondary data reveals multiple interconnected findings about the evolution and functioning of political parties in Pakistan. The results highlight enduring structural weaknesses, historical legacies, and sociopolitical dynamics that continue to influence the character and performance of parties in shaping the country's democratic development.

### **1. Personalization and Dynastic Leadership**

The findings demonstrate that personalization of politics and dynastic leadership remain the most persistent features of Pakistan's political party system. Over successive decades, political organizations have evolved into family-based enterprises where leadership is transferred through hereditary succession rather than democratic election or merit-based advancement. This pattern is particularly visible in the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), where power is concentrated within the Bhutto-Zardari and Sharif families respectively. Afzal (2019) argues that such dynastic control restricts internal party democracy, limits innovation, and discourages new leadership from emerging. Similarly, Waseem (2006) notes that most parties in Pakistan are structured around personalities instead of ideologies, which transforms them into vehicles for elite dominance rather than platforms for public representation. As a result, decision-making becomes centralized and dependent on individual charisma rather than institutional deliberation. This personalization weakens organizational stability, promotes factionalism, and disconnects parties from their broader membership, eroding their legitimacy as democratic institutions.

### **2. Weak Institutionalization and Internal Democracy**

Another key finding concerns the fragile institutional structures within political parties. Despite the existence of formal constitutions and internal rules, parties rarely conduct genuine intra-party elections or maintain mechanisms of internal accountability. Cheema, Javid, and Naseer (2013) found that party offices and nominations are frequently distributed through personal patronage rather than transparent competition, creating hierarchies that mirror feudal social relations. This weak institutionalization prevents political parties from acting as cohesive organizations and leaves them vulnerable to fragmentation during leadership transitions. Shafqat (1998) observes that the absence of consistent institutional procedures has hindered democratic consolidation at both the party and state levels, as political actors prioritize short-term gains over long-term development. The resulting top-down structure discourages participation from ordinary members, reinforces elitism, and weakens responsiveness to the electorate.

### **3. Ideological Ambiguity and Policy Inconsistency**

The study also finds that Pakistan's political parties exhibit limited ideological coherence and a lack of consistent policy orientation. Instead of being grounded in clearly defined ideological frameworks, parties frequently adopt populist slogans and fluid alliances that shift according to political expediency. Nasreen and Younas (2013) note that party manifestos often lack substantive content, serving primarily as rhetorical instruments to attract voters during campaigns. Once elected, governments rarely implement the policy commitments outlined in these manifestos, leading to a widening gap between political promises and performance. This lack of ideological grounding contributes to policy inconsistency and public disillusionment. Huntington (1968) argued that stable democracies require institutionalized parties capable of articulating coherent values and programs; the absence of such institutionalization in Pakistan has resulted in erratic governance, frequent policy reversals, and a general lack of accountability. The electorate, therefore, perceives little difference between political parties, undermining both competition and legitimacy.

### **4. Military Interference and Political Engineering**

The pervasive role of the military establishment in shaping Pakistan's political landscape emerges as a defining factor in the country's democratic evolution. Rizvi (2000) explains that repeated military interventions—through coups, alliances, and indirect manipulation—have prevented the natural maturation of party politics. The formation of military-backed political alliances such as the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) in the late 1980s and the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) during General Musharraf's era exemplifies this trend of political engineering. Shah (2014) further emphasizes that the military's involvement extends beyond direct rule; even during civilian periods, it continues to exert significant influence over key policy areas such as defense and foreign affairs. These interventions have distorted political competition, created client political elites, and normalized dependence on unelected institutions for political survival. As a result, parties often align themselves strategically with the military rather than with their constituencies, thereby weakening the foundations of representative democracy.

### **5. Patronage Politics and Clientelism**

Patron-client relations remain deeply entrenched in Pakistan's political system. Political parties frequently depend on patronage networks to secure electoral victories, especially in rural constituencies where access to state resources is mediated through local elites. Siddiqua (2007) highlights that patronage politics is sustained through the exchange of government jobs, contracts, and development funds in return for political loyalty. Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) describe this as a hallmark of patrimonial governance that undermines accountability and encourages corruption. In such an environment, political allegiance is transactional rather than ideological, and governance becomes a means of distributing favors rather than serving the public interest. The entrenchment of clientelism erodes meritocracy and institutional performance, perpetuating inequality and limiting citizens' faith in the democratic process. Over time, voters have come to view politics as a means of material gain rather than civic participation, which weakens collective responsibility and long-term reform efforts.

### **6. Ethnic and Regional Fragmentation**

The analysis reveals that ethnic and regional politics continue to shape electoral behavior and party structures in Pakistan. Adeney (2015) argues that the mobilization of ethnic identities—while providing marginalized communities with representation—has also fragmented national politics and impeded policy coherence. Parties such as the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Awami National Party (ANP), and Baloch nationalist groups have historically relied on ethnic or linguistic bases for support. While these movements have highlighted important regional grievances, they have also limited the capacity for cross-ethnic collaboration and the formation of national consensus. Jalal (1995) links this pattern to the colonial legacy of administrative divisions and elite-based politics, which reinforced ethnic segmentation rather than integration. The outcome is a political environment where national parties must balance regional demands with national unity, often at the cost of coherent policy planning. Ethnic and

regional fragmentation thus continues to constrain Pakistan's democratic consolidation by preventing the emergence of inclusive political platforms.

### **7. Media Influence and Political Polarization**

The findings indicate that the media plays a paradoxical role in Pakistan's democracy. While it acts as a mechanism of accountability by exposing corruption and malfeasance, it also contributes to political polarization through sensationalist and partisan reporting. Malik (2018) observes that Pakistani media outlets often prioritize drama and controversy over policy analysis, focusing on scandals and personal rivalries rather than substantive governance issues. This tendency has created a culture of performative politics in which leaders engage in rhetoric designed for television rather than meaningful debate. The rise of private news channels and social media platforms has further fragmented public discourse, amplifying echo chambers and misinformation. Although media freedom is a sign of democratic progress, its commercialization and lack of editorial independence weaken its capacity to educate the electorate or promote informed dialogue. Consequently, the media's potential as a democratic institution remains underutilized.

### **8. Judicial and Legal Manipulation**

The politicization of judicial and legal institutions is another major finding of this study. Khan (2005) notes that successive governments have used constitutional amendments, accountability laws, and judicial proceedings to target opponents and consolidate power. Institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) have frequently been accused of selective enforcement, undermining public confidence in their neutrality. Shafqat (1998) emphasizes that such practices blur the distinction between rule of law and political expediency, allowing ruling parties to weaponize legal mechanisms against dissenters. This selective accountability weakens the principle of equality before law and discourages genuine political competition. Over time, the judiciary's perceived alignment with particular political or military interests has further eroded the credibility of democratic institutions and reinforced the perception that justice is contingent on political loyalty rather than legality.

### **9. Limited Role in Policy-Making**

Despite being the primary democratic actors, political parties in Pakistan exert limited influence over core policymaking. Many crucial domains—including defense, security, and foreign relations—remain under the control of unelected institutions. Even in areas where parties hold authority, policymaking is often inconsistent, short-term, and reactive. Shah (2014) argues that this marginalization of civilian actors has created a dual state structure in which the elected government manages day-to-day administration while the military establishment determines strategic direction. The lack of institutionalized policy research and expert advisory mechanisms within parties exacerbates this problem. As Nasreen and Younas (2013) observe, party manifestos are rarely treated as actionable plans, and decisions are typically guided by political expediency rather than empirical analysis. The resulting policy incoherence undermines effective governance and reinforces the perception that parties lack both vision and capacity to govern independently.

### **10. Public Distrust and Declining Participation**

The culmination of these structural and behavioral patterns is evident in the widespread public distrust toward political parties. Years of unfulfilled promises, corruption, and perceived incompetence have generated deep cynicism among citizens, particularly the youth and urban middle class. Afzal (2019) notes that this disillusionment has translated into declining voter turnout and growing apathy toward electoral politics. When citizens lose faith in the ability of parties to deliver good governance, they become more susceptible to anti-political narratives or authoritarian appeals. Shafqat (1998) contends that public alienation from politics weakens the legitimacy of democratic institutions and reduces pressure on elites to reform. The erosion of civic trust thus constitutes both a symptom and a cause of Pakistan's democratic fragility. Restoring confidence requires not only better governance and transparency but also the

cultivation of a political culture that values accountability, inclusivity, and long-term institutional development.

## **Discussion**

The findings reveal that political parties in Pakistan occupy a paradoxical position: indispensable to democratic governance yet frequently undermining it through their own structural weaknesses. The personalization of politics, as Afzal (2019) and Waseem (2006) argue, perpetuates elite dominance and limits institutional development. Parties function as extensions of family power rather than vehicles of public representation. This pattern not only erodes internal democracy but also weakens democratic accountability, as leaders remain insulated from grassroots scrutiny.

Military intervention continues to distort civilian political evolution. Rizvi (2000) and Shah (2014) emphasize that the military's political engineering—through alliances, selective accountability, and constitutional manipulation—has fragmented party systems and constrained civilian authority. These interventions have normalized authoritarian practices within civilian politics, where parties replicate the hierarchical and centralized decision-making typical of military structures.

Furthermore, the persistence of clientelism undermines programmatic politics. Siddiqa (2007) identifies this as a defining feature of Pakistan's political economy, where the exchange of resources for loyalty reinforces corruption and dependency. As a result, policy continuity and institutional integrity suffer. Similarly, ethnic and regional mobilization, though providing localized representation, has fragmented national cohesion, a phenomenon noted by Adeney (2015). The media's dual role—as both watchdog and polarizer—adds complexity to Pakistan's democratic discourse. Malik (2018) notes that partisan reporting amplifies populist rhetoric while sidelining substantive debate. This dynamic has created a depoliticized electorate driven more by emotion and scandal than by informed policy choice.

Institutional theory provides a useful lens to interpret these dynamics. North (1990) and Scott (2008) argue that institutions—formal and informal—shape political behavior through rules and norms. In Pakistan, informal institutions such as kinship, patronage, and clientelism override formal democratic rules, perpetuating cycles of inefficiency and instability. Democratic Consolidation Theory (Linz & Stepan, 1996) complements this by suggesting that democracy remains unconsolidated when major actors rely on non-democratic norms for power acquisition. The findings affirm that Pakistan's democracy, while procedural, lacks the institutional depth necessary for sustainability.

Reforming Pakistan's political system requires addressing these interlocking challenges. Parties must institutionalize internal democracy, foster ideological clarity, and reduce dependence on informal power structures. Moreover, the civil-military imbalance must be rectified through constitutional safeguards and robust civilian oversight. As Cheema et al. (2013) and Jalal (1995) highlight, decentralization and grassroots participation are essential for cultivating democratic habits and leadership beyond elite circles.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of political parties in Pakistan reflects a complex and often contradictory relationship between democratic ideals and enduring authoritarian legacies. Since the country's independence, political parties have been both agents and obstacles in the nation's democratic development. They have played a vital role in mobilizing citizens, framing political discourse, and shaping governance; yet their institutional growth has remained fragile and inconsistent. Personalization and dynastic leadership have dominated the political landscape, creating structures centered on families rather than ideologies or institutional mechanisms. The concentration of authority in the hands of a few elites has stifled merit-based participation, discouraged internal debate, and alienated emerging leaders from the political process. Consequently, parties have struggled to fulfill their foundational democratic functions, often serving as instruments of power preservation rather than platforms of reform and

representation. This structural weakness has contributed to a pattern of political stagnation and limited accountability, where loyalty to personalities outweighs commitment to policy or institutional development.

The recurring interference of the military establishment has further undermined the autonomy and evolution of political parties. Military regimes have repeatedly manipulated, co-opted, or marginalized civilian actors to maintain control, reshaping political competition and altering the balance of power between institutions. Even during civilian rule, the influence of unelected power centers has constrained the effectiveness of political leadership and policymaking. This entrenched imbalance has fostered an environment of dependency, where political survival often hinges on external patronage rather than public legitimacy. The dominance of patronage networks and clientelistic politics has perpetuated corruption, weakened ideological coherence, and reduced governance to transactional exchanges. As a result, public trust in political institutions has steadily eroded, and voter participation has declined. The disillusionment of citizens, particularly youth and urban constituencies, signals a growing disconnect between political parties and the society they claim to represent.

Despite these persistent challenges, political parties in Pakistan remain indispensable to the country's democratic consolidation. Strengthening them requires a comprehensive transformation of their internal structures and external behavior. Institutional reforms that promote transparent leadership selection, internal accountability, and decentralization can foster a more inclusive and representative political culture. Empowering local governments and promoting civic education can help rebuild trust between citizens and the state by ensuring that governance is participatory and responsive. Equally important is the need to reduce military involvement in political affairs and reaffirm constitutional supremacy to safeguard democratic integrity. Political parties must evolve from personality-driven entities into ideologically coherent, policy-oriented organizations capable of addressing the diverse needs of the population. Only through such structural and cultural reforms can they serve as effective instruments of democratic governance, capable of bridging historical divides and steering Pakistan toward a stable, participatory, and resilient democratic future.

### **Way Forward**

Moving Pakistan toward a more stable and representative democratic order requires comprehensive reform of its political party system, institutional structures, and civic culture. The foremost priority is the democratization of political parties themselves through transparent internal elections, merit-based leadership promotion, and strict adherence to party constitutions. Such reforms would reduce the dominance of dynastic control and encourage broader participation from youth, women, and marginalized communities. Institutionalizing accountability mechanisms, including transparent financial reporting and public disclosure of funding sources, would further enhance the credibility of political organizations. Strengthening local governments is equally essential, as decentralization can provide a foundation for grassroots political engagement, leadership development, and policy responsiveness. Political parties must also invest in research and policy think tanks to move beyond rhetoric toward evidence-based governance and long-term planning. At the national level, restoring civilian supremacy and insulating democratic institutions from military interference are critical for ensuring that elected representatives exercise genuine authority. Parallel to these institutional changes, civic education and media literacy initiatives should be expanded to promote informed political participation and counter polarization. A shift from personality-driven and patronage-based politics toward programmatic, policy-oriented competition would gradually rebuild public trust and strengthen democratic accountability. Only through sustained commitment to internal reform, inclusivity, and transparency can Pakistan's political parties evolve into credible agents of democratic consolidation and steer the country toward a more participatory, equitable, and resilient political future.

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