

Political Polarization and Democratic Stability in Pakistan

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Abstract

Political polarization is now a norm of politics in the modern context of Pakistan, which has influenced the competition between the parties and the relationship between the civil and the military, the behaviour of the judicial system, and popular trust in the institutions of democracy. Theoretical framework and lenses of the study, which can be illuminated with the help of the Democratic Consolidation Theory (Linz and Stepan, 1996), are used to discuss the causes and outcomes of the polarization of democracy between the years 2008 and 2026 by resorting to secondary data as examples, peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and newspaper analysis. It is found that polarization in Pakistan is relational and elite-based (McCoy and Somer, 2019), which has its basis in a weak intra-party democracy, a disintegrated media space, politicised institutions of accountability, and enduring civil-military tutelage. These dynamics have undermined horizontal accountability and electoral legitimacy and have driven the system to tutelary democracy as opposed to consolidated democracy (Mohsin Ali, 2025). The paper concludes that judicial and electoral independence, intra-party reformation, responsible media practices, and dialogue between electoral parties are needed to turn this path around.

Keywords: Political Polarization; Democratic Stability; Pakistan; Political Institutions; Governance; Electoral Politics; Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

Democracy and Political Polarization: The Concept

Democracy, in the narrow sense of the term, is the form of government in which the citizens choose and hold to account the rulers by means of free, fair, and periodic elections. On top of this procedural minimum, democratic stability requires more: the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a professional bureaucracy, a free press, and most importantly, a broad consensus among rival political actors that democratic institutions and not extra-constitutional action is the only game in town (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Political polarization is the term used to describe the process through which political and social actors end up organized in different, mutually distrustful camps, according to ideology, partisanship, or identity. Moderate polarization is a normal and even an effective aspect of democracy: it explains decisions of policies and organises people (Hetherington, 2001, as cited in McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018). But once polarization has grown extreme and pathological, anchored to a mutually exclusive Us-versus-Them dichotomy, instead of being anchored to policy, it undermines the principles of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance of democratic stability (McCoy and Somer, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018).

Pakistan's Political Background

The political history of Pakistan since the independence period of 1947 has been marked by fluctuation between the rule of a civilian government and that of the military government,

where elected governments are consistently interrupted every now and then by either direct or indirect military action. The 2008-2022 period has been not only the longest continuous spell of nominally electoral based government (albeit led by civilians) in Pakistan's history, but has also been characterised by increased polarization: sit-ins opposing the Pakistan Muslim league-nawaz (PML-N) government in 2014, the disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by the judiciary in 2017, the disputed election to the position of prime minister by Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2018, and the unrest surrounding the 2024 general elections and ongoing tensions between the executive, the judiciary and the military establishment. Researchers are increasingly nominating this system as a 'hybrid' or 'tutelary' regime, where formal electoral competition exists alongside informal military tutelage in important areas of policy (Mohsin Ali, 2025; Saeed & Ali, 2026).

Research Problem

Although there is an increasing number of studies that record the separate aspects of the political crisis in Pakistan, such as civil-military relationship, court activism, populism, social media control, etc., fewer studies synthesize them into a coherent, theoretically-driven explanation of how political polarization, as a process, derails democracy. This article fills that gap by discussing polarization as something that is not merely a symptom of the political turmoil in Pakistan, but rather an independent cause that works with, and often exacerbates, institutional weaknesses.

Research Objectives

This paper will set out to

- Define the major causes of political polarization in Pakistan in the period since 2008
- Determine how political parties, media and judiciary have contributed to the creation and perpetuation of polarization
- Evaluate the effects of polarization on democratic institutions and governance
- Offer evidence-based policy recommendations to curb unhealthy polarization and enhance democracy through the rule of law.

Research Questions

- What are the main factors contributing to political polarization in modern Pakistan?
- What role do political parties, mainstream media, and social media platforms play in enhancing polarization?
- How does polarisation influence the operation of the democratic institutions in Pakistan, such as parliament, judiciary, and the Election Commission?
- What are the possible institutional and policy responses that can plausibly aid in alleviating pernicious polarization and facilitate democratic consolidation?

Importance of the research

The insights gained into the polarization-stability nexus in Pakistan are not just for the country. Pakistan is among the most high-profile modern examples of a high-nuclear-armed, majority-Muslim state, trying to maintain its electoral democracy under the conditions of military tutelage, and the example set by Pakistan can have comparative learning points for other hybrid democracies in South and Southeast Asia. A more developed diagnosis of the working of polarization can inform more specific institutional reforms, media-literacy interventions, and dialogue mechanisms to address backsliding of democracy, to domestic policymakers, civil society organisations, and international development partners.

Literature Review

Global Literature on Political Polarization

The literature on polarization has changed in recent years more toward an understanding of polarization based on relational and procedural rather than ideological distance between

political parties. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) suggest that the idea of severe polarization is best described as a social and political phenomenon where a society becomes divided into two mutually distrustful camps, which they call pernicious polarization. A related study across eleven country cases, by McCoy and Somer (2019), reveals that pernicious polarization cannot be accounted by any specific social division or institutional set-up; instead, it is a phenomenon that grows when political entrepreneurs consciously pursue the strategies of polarization; namely, inflammatory rhetoric, demonization of adversaries, and manipulation of prior grievances; and that polarizing strategies are met by counter polarizing strategies, not by depolarizing strategies. The wider research programme of Somer and McCoy reveals that pernicious polarization is likely to continue to propagate, out of formal politics into social relations such that it becomes self-reinforcing and difficult to resolve by normal electoral means. Slater and Arugay (2018) study the interaction of executive power and institutional conflict to generate polarizing forces in some Asian-based democracies, which is a useful comparative point of reference in the Pakistani context. Foundational democratization theory, in turn, places these processes within the context of the general question of democratic consolidation: According to Linz and Stepan (1996), the conception of a democracy being the only game in town, behaviourally, attitudinally, and constitutionally is the condition of democratic consolidation, which severe polarization directly undermines as it provides actors incentives to play outside constitutional rules as opposed to inside them.

South Asian Perspective

In South Asia, polarisation has been intimately associated with a weak party system and personalised politics, and unequal institutionalisation of checks over executive power. In (comparative) treatments of democratic backsliding in the region, such as contexts that juxtapose the Pakistani case with populist experiences in South and Southeast Asia, the emphasis on the use of polarising appeals by politicians in hybrid regimes to consolidate personal power, coupled with an act of delegitimising independent bureaucratic and judicial institutions, is usually highlighted (James, 2023; Slater and Arugay, 2018). That such a regional trend indicates that even though Pakistan has been subjected to the influence of unique national dynamics (civil-military relations), it also demonstrates how hybrid and semi-consolidated democracies in the region are under pressure due to structural forces.

Pakistan-Specific Studies

An extensive and quickly expanding corpus of Pakistan-related studies captures the escalation of polarization after about 2013-2014. Alam (2025) follows the history of political polarization since 2013 that intensified ethnic, ideological, and partisan divisions, undermined people's trust in institutions, and made making any democratic decisions even more dysfunctional, but offers a policy matrix with governance, regulation of media, and civil-society involvement. The qualitative interview-based study concludes that ideological polarization is no longer acute in terms of party loyalty but indicative of a deeper identity-based worldviews in Pakistan rooted on religion, nationalism, and class, exacerbated by digital echo chambers and highly emotive political rhetoric, with respondents relating the presence of extreme polarization to a loss of institutional credibility and the necessity of democratic backsliding (Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). Complementary quantitative analysis of regression data reports that online misinformation can be considered one of the biggest predictors of polarization, and that the delivery of content by algorithmic solutions on social media is fueling ideological division and weakening confidence in the democratic process (Journal of Media Horizons, 2026). A similar line of research places polarization in the context of a larger institutional crisis of the hybrid regime in Pakistan. Using a balance-of-power theory, Mohsin Ali (2025) makes his argument that the tutelary hybrid regime in Pakistan has undermined political institutions as well as public administration since 2008 and that the post-2022 period, both the political and constitutional crisis in the aftermath of Imran Khan being ousted as Prime Minister and subsequent arrest, has seen some of the worst instances of intra-regime backsliding in Pakistani

history. Saeed and Ali (2026) also use a delegative-democracy model to characterize the 2018-2025 period and believe that institutional decadence, democratic debasement, and citizen mistrust create a self-sustaining cycle between judiciary, parliament, and the Election Commission of Pakistan. Judicial politics maps the history of how judicial bodies in Pakistan have enhanced and supplanted democratic competition in some instances, and seen a resurgent judiciary as decisive political powers in high-profile cases of accountability, including the Panama Papers proceedings against Nawaz Sharif (Kureshi, 2025; Kureishi and Waseem, 2024), but larger accounts of judicial review entail ongoing conflict between an aggressive judiciary and the entrenchment of the rule of law (Malik, 2023). Historical and institutional explanations further back up recurrent cycles of military takeover, constitutional change, and civil-military bargaining that have institutionally encoded the previous democratic performance of Pakistan since 1958 (Kukreja, 2003; Zafar, 2026), and worldwide comparative indices confirm that the democratic performance of Pakistan has steadily degraded in a wider global trend of autocratization (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Research Gap

The available Pakistan-specific literature is inclined to focus on polarization, civil-military relations, judicial politics, and media dynamics as two or more research streams. Not a lot of literature holds these strands collectively in one, clearly theorised explanation of the interaction between polarization as a relation-specific, elite-dominated process and the hybrid, institutional framework of Pakistan in generating democratic instability. This paper attempts to fill that breach by incorporating these strands within the premise of Democratic Consolidation Theory.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will employ Democratic Consolidation Theory as its theoretical framework, which was mainly linked with Linz and Stepan (1996). Linz and Stepan describe a consolidated democracy as that whereby discussion of democratic governance has become the only game in town in three interlocking senses: behaviourally, no significant political or social group is serious about pursuing its goals, via the establishment of a non-democratic regime, or by secession; attitudinally, the vast majority of the populace is convinced that the establishment of democratic procedures and institutions is the most legitimate way, in which, and through which, it should govern collective life, and, constitutionally, all major political actors have become accustomed to settling conflicts within the ambit of determinate, agreed-upon laws, procedures, and institutions. Linz and Stepan also claim that the five interacting arenas needed in the process of consolidation are: a free and vibrant civil society, a comparatively independent political society, the rule of law, a usable state bureaucracy, and an institutionalised economic society. The Pakistani case fits very well into the Democratic Consolidation Theory due to three reasons. First, it describes the instability of the democratic system not only as the instrument of the formal constitutional structure but as of the elite and mass behaviour - the plain where pernicious polarization performs its acts (McCoy et al., 2018). Second, it is compatible with hybrid or tutelary systems such as Pakistan is, where elections are regularly contested, but some essences of political society and the rule of law are compromised by military tutelage (Mohsin Ali, 2025). Third, it provides a normative reference point, the only game in town criterion, by which the dust-eating qualities of polarization on institutional restraint, on topical forbearance on one another, and the nonviolent change of leadership can be evaluated. The analysis, where applicable, is also informed by the complementary knowledge of the pernicious-polarization literature (McCoy and Somer, 2019), with help of which it is possible to outline the specific mechanisms of the polarization that compromises the arenas of consolidation that Lenin and Stepan identified: the elite-based Us versus Them framing, the rhetoric of demonization, and the mutual escalation between the government and the opposition.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative research based on analysis of secondary data. Academic databases and journal repositories were selectively searched using combinations of the following words with the net effect of identifying sources: political polarization, democratic stability, democratic backsliding, civil-military relations, and Pakistan. The choice of materials was made based on their appeal, currency (with a bias towards sources published from 2018 to 2026), and the credibility of the source, with priority being given to peer-reviewed sources and institutional reports. The material collected was analysed in terms of themes, and the repetitive themes, which are the causes of polarization, the role of political parties, the dynamics of the media, and the effects of polarizing institutions, were arranged in the five analytical sub-sections depicted in the Discussion. Being a qualitative and document-based study, this research creates no primary, survey data; it contributes to the synthesis and theoretically informed interpretation of the existing scholarship and institutional reporting. This has been realised as a limitation, and conclusions drawn in the study can be read to be analytically and not statistically generalisable.

Discussion and Analysis

The Reasons of Polarization of Politics in Pakistan

The increase in political polarization in Pakistan since 2013 has many interacting factors. First, the ineffective intra-party democracy has been centralizing political power in strong personalities and dynastic political leaderships of key parties, which attracts a politics of personal devotion and contestability instead of competition over agendas (Alam, 2025). Party systems in Pakistan continue to be arranged around a central leader or family, with the selection of candidates, distribution of tickets, and the making of internal decisions being centrally based on the top instead of mediated by competitive internal elections. This centralisation of power will not encourage the formation of a loyal internal opposition that could help to soften the rhetorical stance of a party, and it will be personalised: much political conflict is often experienced and reported as conflict between a party leader or leaders and not as a conflict over policy (Alam, 2025). Second, the steady judicialisation of political conflicts, such as the disqualification of incumbent prime ministers and high-profile accountability inquiries, has perpetually placed the core political race out of the electoral field, replaced in the place of it by the courtroom, fueling suspicions among the competing camps that the institution is becoming firmly partisan (Kureshi and Waseem, 2024; Kureshi, 2025). The disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 2017 after the proceedings of the Panama Papers, and the consequent series of accountability proceedings against both succeeding governments and opposition leaders, exemplifies how the courts have become the hotspot of inter-party activity. Kureshi (2025) states that courts in hybrid states like Pakistan have already moved back and forth between enhancing the democratic competition and undermining it, assuming at times the role of decisive political leader- a position that, despite the constitutionality of the choices rendered by these courts, is interpreted by the adversaries as indicative of judicial capture, further embedding the distrust between the opposing political blocs.

Third, a long-standing military overreach in major policy sectors, and cycles of informal adjustment of the military establishment to certain political forces have spawned discourses of an unbalanced playing field, which deepens an Us versus Them political atmosphere in Pakistan (Mohsin Ali, 2025; Saeed and Ali, 2026). Since civilian administrations in Pakistan have long relied to a greater or lesser extent on the tacit acceptance or non-cooperation of the military establishment, incumbent administrations have frequently been accused by opposition parties of being put into power (or kept in office) by non-democratic means, and of opposition parties collaborating with the establishment to remove their rivals once they leave office. Such an accusation-and-counter-accusation cycle, which is reported in the PML, PPP, and PTI governments alternating, is a classic example of the interdependence of the up-and-down escalation cycle recognized in the comparative polarization literature (McCoy & Somer, 2019). Fourth, the politics of identity of religion, ethnicity, regionalism, and class have been

perpetually mobilised by political entrepreneurs as the tools of polarization instead of elimination in pluralistic accommodation (Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). Fifth, economic forces on the system, such as popular inflation, currency depreciation, and frequent balance-of-payments crises with the need to be assisted by International Monetary Fund, have provided a very continuous flow of grievances, which political actors on both sides have translated into partisan blame scripts instead of policy issues, cementing the view that the opposing sides are the cause of the country's economic predicament (Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). When combined, none of these five factors in itself causes another to occur; instead, they all cumulatively interact, where a weakly institutionalised party system, a judicialized political arena, uneven victim of civil-military relationship, mobilised identity cleavages, and economic grievance combine to create a political environment where polarization is continuously recreated, not solved after one election period.

The Place of Political Parties

The key political parties in Pakistan have also, in one way or the other, taken polarizing positions in their approach to elections and their rhetoric in a manner that portrays the other not as a political adversary but as a threat to both the state and to democracy itself. This trend aligns with the pernicious-polarization literature that focuses on the agency of elites: when political entrepreneurs adopt such a mobilisation strategy by using divisive and demonizing discourse, and when any of the opposing elites respond through similar polarization, polarization becomes more pronounced (McCoy and Somer, 2019). The PTI, which gained momentum after 2011, based their momentum on an anti-corruption and anti-dynastic politics discourse that portrayed the PML-N and the PPP as one, entrenched, status quo elite; the PDM government, which removed Imran Khan to power in 2022, was built on the message of the PTI government being illegitimate and economically disastrous. All the framing moves have inclined to close any possibility of a prosaic, faithful opposition relationship that Linz and Stepan (1996) recognize as vital to an integrated political society.

In this respect, populist mobilisation strategies, in particular, have been effective in strengthening the backbone support, whilst at the same time entrenching cross-party distrust and delegitimising institutions to the contrary, such as parliament and the judiciary (Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). Populist political forms are more likely to base political loyalty on an individual figure, and to present the political survival of the individual in question as identical to the political survival of a pure democracy or national self-determination - a presentation that leaves little opportunity to bargain on the matter once they have lost their position in Parliament or the judiciary, however constitutionally legitimate. The example of the 2022 no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Imran Khan and the ensuing mobilisation in the streets and the sense of foreign-supported regime change conspiracy rebranding of fairly ordinary constitutional practices shows how easy it can be to refound politics in all directions, moving beyond the direct vote of parliament (Mohsin Ali, 2025). This has been complicated by opposition behaviour. Instead of acting mainly by parliamentary discussion, the opposition political parties in Pakistan have often turned to boycotts, demonstrations in the streets (dharna politics), and an appeal to the judiciary or even the military hierarchy to resolve conflicts which otherwise could be resolved by the electoral contest. The phenomenon, visible in the 2014 sit-in by the PTI on its host government led by Pakistani PML-N and the 2024 general election protests, again led by the PTI, is seen as a failure of what Linz and Stepan (1996) term as a failure of an autonomous political society - the space where parties, elections and legislatures must be able to conflict in their own terms, without the contribution of non-electoral arbiters.

Polarization of the Media and Social Media

The shifting nature of media has progressively taken a central part in the exaggeration of polarization. The commercial landscape of traditional mainstream media in Pakistan is extremely partisan, and television talk shows and print media often formally or informally fall

into specific political camps or even into the whims of state establishments. This media framework incentivizes confrontational, personality-based programming, notwithstanding the existence of deliberative policy debate, as partisan framing is a sure way to draw an audience that is already polarized. Social media networks have further reinforced this dynamic over more recent years. Regression research indicates that misinformation is one of the best foretellers of polarization in Pakistan and that algorithm-driven content delivery exposes ideological divisions in people and demeans democratic institutions among them (Journal of Media Horizons, 2026). Recommended algorithms are designed to promote maximum engagement over accuracy or balance, resulting in a systematic bias to promote content that is emotionally loaded and identity-affirming, which exposes users to large amounts of content that validate rather than challenge existing political identities. This trend is supported by qualitative reports of digital echo chambers, which solidify in-group prejudices, promote symbolic as opposed to policy-based politics, and amplify populist information to younger, digitally active voters (Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). Organised social media campaigns, in some cases referred to in Pakistani political terms as social media cells, which organise hashtag campaigns, promote positive coverage, and coordinate attacks on adversary politicians and journalists, have been a significant investment by political parties themselves, which further confuses the distinction between organised public opinion and partisan consensus. The net effect, which is comparable to the international literature on digital polarization, is that political competition becomes ever more difficult to compromise, as it is conducted using opposing, mutually-reinforcing information ecosystems instead of a common baseline of facts, makes it even more difficult to strike a cross-party compromise (McCoy et al., 2018). Meanwhile, even the actions of the state in response to this environment itself have become controversial: frequently, limiting social media platforms during times of political stress is viewed by its opponents as an exercise of excessive authoritarian power by the government by its opponents but as containing attempts to control the content in such situations.

Democratic Institutions Implications

Accumulation of such dynamics has resulted in a quantifiable undermining of the performance of the institutions and the trust among the people. Parliament has been found time and time again incapable of working as a means of cross-party political discussions, and opposition parties on numerous occasions boycotted, resigned in full, or hit the streets instead of engaging in long-term discussions of the legislation. This has led to the enactment, in most instances, of landmark legislation and amendments that have been short-changed, and in some cases, they have not been debated; or there has been participation in meaningful debates by the opposition, rendering this legislation weakened as the main platform through which the rival political camps transact the rules of the game (Zafar, 2026). Its capacity to administer cases touching upon core political differences, whether it is disqualification of prime ministers or the legality of constitutional changes themselves, has attracted charges of inconsistency and selectiveness in applying standards of accountability across the spectrum of the political spectrum, making it a hard sell as a neutral enforcer of the law (Kureshi, 2025; Malik, 2023). Farooq, Rafique and Qambar (2016) also stress that an independent judiciary is the key to nation-building in Pakistan, but they also point out that historically judicial independence has been undermined by bouts of executive and military influence, something that rears its head whenever politically sensitive cases become the subject of the attention of the higher courts. When court decisions support one political bloc, the other often labels the judiciary as partisan and the direction taken as the rule of law being vindicated, whereas the case could, in fact, be quite justifiable by the standards of the rule of law, no matter how the particular case may be. Whenever decisions go in favour of one political block, the other usually denounces the court system as partisan and the decision as the rule of law being upheld, though the merits of that case may be quite justifiable according to the rule of law, either way (Kureshi and Waseem, 2024). The Election Commission of Pakistan also has encountered persistent criticism regarding its management of pre-poll procedures, delimitation, and the management and control of results

and outcomes of the 2024 general election, which adds to the perception amongst losing parties that there is an unequal playing field on election matters. Since electoral legitimacy underlies the only game in town standard of democratic consolidation, there is an exceptionally corrosive impact of electoral contestation, as everyone who participates in the games loses, and the defeated party offers a ready-made defence in favour of extra-parliamentary mobilisation, not to mention the reduced willingness of losers to accept future electoral results as binding (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Institutional analyses explain a vicious circle between institutional failure leading to democratic erosion, which in turn erodes the trust people have in institutions, and undermines its ability to deal with political conflict (Saeed and Ali, 2026). Civil-military relationships are one more problematic level: since the military establishment still holds significant informal power in crucial areas of policy, all the conflicts that in a fully consolidated democracy would have to be fully resolved within the political institution are, at a certain point, outsourced, officially or unofficially, to the establishment, and thus affects the independence of political society further (Mohsin Ali, 2025). In line with the global patterns of democracy evaluations that indicate a greater trend of autocratization, the overall institutional tendency of Pakistan throughout this time indicates a tendency to pull out of the only game in town, though it is traditionally linked to sturdy democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

The Civil-Military Dimension of Polarization

Any description of political polarization in Pakistan cannot be complete without mentioning the civil-military relationship, which, in turn, serves as a force of polarization on its own, as well as a multiplier of the prevailing dynamics listed above. Kukreja (2003) follows the process by which continued intervention since 1958 has interrupted the process of institutionalisation of political society, forcing one generation of politicians to be successively denied any longer institution of solving disputes in a purely civilian, parliamentary way. More recent studies apply the analysis to the post-2008 time frame: Mohsin Ali (2025) describes Pakistan as a tutelary hybrid regime where the military still commands an overriding informal influence on more or less national security to less and less economic management at the hands of a much younger elected civilian government in nominal office. This set-up produces polarization in at least two ways. First, since the chances of establishment favour have always been associated with parties gaining or losing the government formation, parties have significant incentives to not just seek votes, but also seek the tacit support of the establishment, a contest that is fought through closed informal means, not through the open political processes. This is causing suspicion on the part of the competitors that the election results are being influenced by non-electoral forces, an assumption that has accompanied any government that has been installed since 2008 to some extent. Second, the ensuing clash of a large political party and the military establishment when tension between a civil and military are on-record, as has occurred drama-queeningly after the events of May 9, 2023, when proponents of the PTI were suspected of assaulting military installations after Imran Khan had been arrested creates a polarising Us versus Them fault that stretches far beyond regular partisan politics, such as the question of whether one should remain loyal to the state itself (Mohsin Ali, 2025). According to Saeed and Ali (2026), this civil-military tension-judicial intervention-parliamentary weakness feedback mechanism has become self-sustaining in that each institutional actor seeks to lay claim on the other, actually exacerbating the overall system, instead of solving one issue.

Comparative Reflection

Putting Pakistan in the context of the comparative literature on pernicious polarization makes it very clear what is unique in the case of Pakistan and what it has in common with other polarized democracies. According to Slater and Arugay (2018), in a variety of Asian democracies, polarization is strongly associated with struggles over executive authority and the accommodation of incumbents deploying state agencies against their rivals- a trend which is nearly evident in the ongoing cycle of accountability scandals against sitting prime ministers in Pakistan. However, in contrast to most of the examples discussed in the more general

pernicious-polarization literature, though, the polarization in Pakistan is framed by a particular third party, namely the military establishment, which possesses an informal power of veto that prevents the government and the opposition to engage in bilateral competitive politics but instead is continuously confronted with a third, non-elected veto player (Mohsin Ali, 2025; Kukreja, 2003). This is in contrast to other like cases, such as the United States or even in many Latin American democracies, where polarization, however extreme, is conducted in large part through the civilian institutions. It further hypothesizes that depolarization strategies directly inspired by those settings might need considerable adjustments before they can be profitably implemented in Pakistan, since the party-level polarization would not have been addressed, leaving the inherent civil-military engine of instability untouched (Saeed & Ali, 2026).

Policy Recommendations

To start with, political parties must be urged to enhance intra-party democracy, in both legalism, mandated by the Elections Act, and internal voluntariness, by making internal party-office elections truly competitive and by making their candidate-selection processes more transparent, with less of a focus on personalised and dynastic leadership models (Alam, 2025). Second, the independence, procedural transparency, and technical capacity of the Election Commission of Pakistan need to be reaffirmed - with transparent results-management systems and depoliticised appointment procedures for members of the Commission - to restore cross-party trust in electoral outcomes, as contentious elections are some of the most dependably polarising events in the recent political history of the country. Third, reforms in the judicial system must be oriented at procedural uniformity, open replacement procedures (how cases are assigned to judges), and depoliticisation of the management of politically sensitive cases, so that win-seeking through litigation is less incentivised and insistence that judicial decisions depend upon the political affiliation of the litigating parties (Kureshi, 2025; Malik, 2023). Fourth, media policy must become more pluralistic, with professional editorial practices, and digital-literacy projects that can overcome the effects of algorithm-driven misinformation as opposed to focusing more on restrictive regulation of social media networks that become an additional polarizing tool, and an extension of executive power (Journal of Media Horizons, 2026). Fifth, civil military relations, such as increased parliamentary control over defence and security policy and a more obvious, publicly perceived division of military and civilian spheres of its power, must be reformed gradually and negotiated to start with the structural source of polarization discussed in section 5.5, though it is likely to be the most sluggish and potentially the most politically challenging to actually implement (Mohsin Ali, 2025). Sixth, and more generally, civil society organisations, academic institutions, and foreign colleagues, can facilitate organised, prolonged mechanisms of cross-party dialogue that will restore a minimal elite consensus that rudiments of democratic competition - a step that in the books identifies comparative literature as a necessary condition to un-polarize any polarity already achieved, as this polarization is maintained essentially by elite strategic action and not extreme structural circumstances and is thus, at least theoretically, reversible by elite-level depolarising action (McCoy & Somer, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how the forms of political polarization and democratic stability in Pakistan are connected using the Democratic Consolidation Theory. Polarization in modern Pakistan is, I think, not to be seen as an unavoidable by-product of ideological diversity, but rather as a process of relations, fueled by defective intra-party democracy, judicialization of political struggle, an unequal balance of civil and military power, and a media-technological environment filled with misinformation and algorithm promotion. As forums of democratic contestation, these dynamics have quantifiably undercut parliament, judiciary, and the Election Commission of Pakistan as they drive the political system even further below the standard of democracy as the only game in town, as advanced by Linz and Stepan (1996). Simultaneously, the existing comparative literature on pernicious polarization indicates that there are few

reasons to think this trend is irreversible: since extreme forms of polarization are more driven by elite action than structural imperative, institutional reform, combined with depolarizing leadership, can presumably cause Pakistan to shift its political curve towards a new spell of democratic consolidation. Further studies would be enriched by the addition of this qualitative, paper-based study with primary survey and elite interview information that can trace the process of polarisation in more empirical detail at the level of individual voters, party organisations and institutional actors.

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