

A Historical Analysis of Political Polarization and Instability in Pakistan (1947-2022)

Muhammad Shafiq¹ Malik Hammad Ahmad² Moazam Ilyas³

Abstract: This study examines the historical trajectory of political polarization and instability in Pakistan from 1947 to 2022. After the demise of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's political framework quickly weakened, characterized by escalating tensions between East and West Pakistan's leadership. This regional rift hindered democratic progress and created conditions for prolonged military rule. The intensifying discord in East Pakistan ultimately resulted in the region's secession and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, a consequence of deep-rooted political polarization and ideological divisions among Pakistan's political parties, which fuelled divergence and eventually led to the breakup of the nation. In West Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power, but his government quickly encountered widespread opposition through the PNA movement, culminating in General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup and a prolonged martial law regime lasting a decade. The 1990s saw heightened political competition between Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, further destabilizing the country and paving the way for another military intervention by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. Following the return to democracy in 2008, successive governments, first led by the PPP and later by the PML-N, faced mounting political resistance. The emergence of PTI intensified partisan divisions, especially after its 2018 electoral triumph. The subsequent creation of the PDM and the successful no-confidence vote against the PTI government in 2022 marked a new era of political fragmentation and institutional instability. This paper examines how persistent civil-military conflicts, contested elections, and inter-party strife have perpetuated political turmoil throughout Pakistan's post-independence history.

Key Words: Polarization, Instability, Democracy, Dictatorship, Secession, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Leadership

Introduction

The All-India Muslim League (AIML) emerged as the principal political representative of Muslims in British India, advocating for their distinct political, cultural, and religious identity. Under the leadership of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the party mobilized support for the creation of a separate homeland, culminating in the establishment of Pakistan on August 14, 1947. However, following Jinnah's death in September 1948, the newly formed state faced significant political turmoil, marked by leadership vacuums and institutional instability that hindered the consolidation of a coherent national governance framework (Nawaz, 2015). With the evolution of divergent political ideologies, the initial signs of political disintegration gradually transformed into a deep-rooted process of political polarization. This ideological divide not only fragmented the political landscape but also contributed to broader social fragmentation as political actors and parties increasingly aligned themselves along competing ideological lines (Weber et al., 2021). Consequently, political polarization had a modest but significant impact on the democratic state (Milacic, 2021).

In the initial three years of Pakistan's independence, political power was predominantly concentrated among landowners and the feudal elite, who wielded significant economic and social influence. The subsequent period from 1951 to 1956 is widely regarded as one of political polarization and instability. During this time, under the parliamentary

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: muhammad_shafiq@iub.edu.pk

² Assistant Professor, Department of History, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: malik.hammad@aiou.edu.pk

³ M.Phil. Scholar, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: moazamilyas007@gmail.com

system, self-centred figures such as Ghulam Muhammad (1951-1955) and Iskandar Mirza (1955-1958) exercised substantial control over the state apparatus, effectively operating quasi-subordinate governments. This era witnessed significant shifts in political ideologies and alignments, which precipitated individual realignments and contributed to widespread political turmoil, uncertainty, and factional antagonism (Nawaz, [2015](#)). The two successive periods of martial law in Pakistan from 1958 to 1968 and from 1969 to 1971 significantly contributed to the political fragmentation of the country, culminating in the separation of East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 (Khan & Fahad, [2018](#)).

Significance and Scope of the Study

This study is significant for understanding the persistent patterns of political polarization and instability in Pakistan, which have repeatedly undermined democratic development and national cohesion. By tracing political developments from the country's inception to the present day, the study offers a comprehensive examination of how institutional fragility, civil-military imbalance, and adversarial party politics have shaped the trajectory of the state.

The scope of the study spans from 1947 to 2022, covering major political transitions, including constitutional developments, military interventions, democratic breakdowns, electoral controversies, and the rise of ideological polarization. Special attention is given to critical junctures such as the 1971 secession of East Pakistan, the martial law regimes, the return to parliamentary politics in the 1990s, and the post-2008 democratic process.

This research contributes to the broader academic discourse in political science, comparative politics, and South Asian studies by providing a historical lens to contemporary political challenges in Pakistan. It is particularly relevant for scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners interested in governance, conflict resolution, and democratic institution-building in post-colonial states.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach that combines descriptive, historical, and analytical methods to examine the evolution of political polarization and instability in Pakistan from 1947 to 2022. The research is grounded in a critical examination of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include memoirs and autobiographies. Secondary sources comprise academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles and newspapers,

The historical method is employed to trace key political events and transitions, while the descriptive analysis provides a narrative account of the political developments across different regimes. The analytical component focuses on identifying patterns of political polarization, civil-military relations, and institutional weaknesses, aiming to understand their causes and consequences over time. This multi-method approach enables a nuanced exploration of Pakistan's political history, emphasizing how past events shape current dynamics.

Political Disintegration and the Crisis of Civilian Leadership

The sudden death of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1948 marked a profound national tragedy and triggered a leadership vacuum in the nascent state of Pakistan. His successor, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan (1947-1951), faced formidable challenges on both internal and external fronts; however, his efforts to stabilize the country met with limited success. In the absence of strong central leadership, party politics began to fragment, particularly within the ranks of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) in Punjab. Key figures such as Nawab Iftikhar Hussain Mamdot (1947-1949) and Mian Mumtaz Daultana (1951-1953) engaged in political rivalry driven by personal and factional interests, contributing significantly to political instability in the province and weakening the foundations of democratic governance. (Rafiq, [n.d.](#)).

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan made efforts to mediate the growing tensions between regional political factions; however, neither side demonstrated a willingness to compromise. In March 1951, provincial elections were held in Punjab, resulting in Mian Mumtaz Daultana's election as Chief Minister. Following the assassination of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in October 1951, Governor General Khawaja Nazimuddin assumed the office of Prime Minister. It appears that Nazimuddin sought the premiership primarily to elevate himself to the stature and political prominence of his predecessor. His ascent to this position was facilitated through collaboration with influential figures such as Ghulam Muhammad and Nawab Mushtaq Ahmed Gurmani. This development marked an early and significant deviation from democratic norms, as Nazimuddin was neither elected nor formally nominated by the members of the Constituent

Assembly. Through a series of behind-the-scenes political manoeuvres often referred to as "palace conspiracies", Ghulam Muhammad, whom Liaquat Ali Khan had intended to remove from his cabinet, succeeded in becoming the Governor General. Notably, Ghulam Muhammad did not seek electoral legitimacy and did not consider himself accountable to the public or representative institutions. These events collectively represented a critical step towards the erosion of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan (Rafiq, [n.d.](#)). Furthermore, during this period, significant political disagreement emerged over the recommendations of the Basic Principles Committee, particularly regarding parliamentary representation. Many Punjabi politicians opposed the proposed proportional representation model, which allocated greater representation to East Pakistan based on population. This contentious issue further deepened the political divide between Daultana and Nazimuddin, exacerbating regional tensions and highlighting the fragile nature of early post-independence governance in Pakistan (Rehman, [1982](#)).

In the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Chief Minister Khan Abdul Qayyum Khan (1947-1953) adopted increasingly repressive tactics, filling provincial jails with political opponents. After the Central Muslim League elections, he forged an alliance with representatives from East Pakistan that enabled the election of Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman as president of the All-Pakistan Muslim League (APML). NWFP politics entered a critical phase when a protracted power struggle erupted between Qayyum Khan and Yusuf Khattak; the clash ultimately cost Qayyum Khan his own legislative seat, though he continued to serve as acting president of the provincial Muslim League until 1951 (Rafiq, [n.d.](#)).

Political tensions escalated between Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin and Governor General Ghulam Muhammad, reflecting the growing instability within Pakistan's early political structure. In response to these conflicts, Ghulam Muhammad exercised his executive authority to dismiss Nazimuddin in 1953 despite the latter's parliamentary support. He subsequently appointed Muhammad Ali Bogra (1953-1955) as Prime Minister, marking a significant shift in the balance of power between the executive and the legislature during the formative years of Pakistan's political system. (Syed, [1989](#)).

The pursuit of self-serving interests by political elites introduced significant challenges to Pakistan's national political framework, fostering ideological divisions that led to defections, party fragmentation, and the emergence of rival factions. This erosion of intra-party cohesion undermined political stability and contributed to governmental dysfunction. The situation further deteriorated when Governor General Malik Ghulam Muhammad unilaterally dismissed Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin's administration and, on October 24, 1954, dissolved Pakistan's first Constituent Assembly while declaring a state of emergency. This act not only intensified the constitutional crisis but also marked a critical setback for democratic development in the nascent state (Malik, [2008](#)).

During this period of political turbulence, a new cabinet was constituted under the leadership of Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra, with General Ayub Khan appointed as Minister of Defence, a move that marked the increasing influence of the military within civilian governance. Simultaneously, Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan, the President of the dissolved Constituent Assembly, filed a writ petition in the Sindh High Court challenging the legality of the Governor-General's dissolution of the assembly. The High Court ruled in favour of Tamizuddin, thereby temporarily reinstating his position. However, the federal government appealed the decision to the Federal Court, which overturned the High Court's judgment and upheld the Governor General's actions, thereby reinforcing executive supremacy over constitutional authority (Hamid, [1993](#)).

In 1954, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy joined the Punjab cabinet, and on August 6, 1955, Iskandar Mirza assumed office as Acting Governor General. Soon thereafter, Muhammad Ali Bogra tendered his resignation, and Chaudhry Muhammad Ali (1955-1956), a senior bureaucrat with limited political experience, was appointed Prime Minister. His tenure proved to be short-lived and politically fragile, culminating in his resignation on September 8, 1956. He was succeeded by Suhrawardy on September 12, 1956, with Feroz Khan Noon appointed as Foreign Minister. Suhrawardy's premiership, however, lasted only 59 days, after which he was replaced by I.I. Chundrigar (October 17, 1957, to December 16, 1957). Chundrigar's administration was equally short-lived, and he was soon succeeded by Feroz Khan Noon (1957-1958). Throughout this phase of escalating instability, Governor-General Iskandar Mirza increasingly relied on General Ayub Khan to maintain control over the deteriorating political order. The repeated changes in leadership and persistent institutional weakness ultimately led to the postponement of the general elections

initially scheduled for 1957, which were deferred to 1958, setting the stage for military intervention and the eventual imposition of martial law (Hamid, [1993](#)).

On March 23, 1956, the first constitution was implemented after nine years of independence (Pardesi, [n.d.](#)). Amid escalating political instability and institutional paralysis, President Iskandar Mirza abrogated the 1956 Constitution on October 7, 1958. He subsequently dissolved both the national and provincial assemblies, marking the imposition of Pakistan's first martial law. This event signalled the beginning of direct military involvement in the country's political affairs and set a precedent for future civil-military power dynamics ("Flashback: The Martial Law", [2011](#)).

Following the declaration of Martial Law, state authority was shared between President Mirza and General Ayub Khan, who was named Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). This power-sharing arrangement inevitably led to a conflict between the two leaders. On 24 October 1958, President Mirza attempted to consolidate power by appointing Ayub as prime minister and forming a new cabinet composed solely of non-political figures. However, Ayub, backed by his position as army chief, sought greater control. Sensing his weakening grip, Mirza allegedly tried to secure support from Air Force officials and Ayub's opponents, even attempting without success to instruct Air Commodore Rabb, the PAF Chief of Staff, to detain four of Ayub's loyal generals, including Major General Yahya Khan. On 27 October 1958, Ayub, after consulting with his trusted generals Azam Khan, Barki, and Shaikh, who were also part of the Union Cabinet, decided to remove Mirza from power and assume complete control of the government (Khan, [2005](#)). The above situation shows that in a complex and politically fragmented country like Pakistan, fostering strong economic and political values has been exceptionally challenging, especially at the institutional level. The military establishment and bureaucracy, aided by self-serving politicians, have played a destructive role in undermining the country's political institutions (Jalal, [1991](#)). A pertinent example is the example of President Iskander Mirza, a retired Major General, who abrogated the 1956 Constitution primarily because it imposed limitations on presidential authority and did not secure a favorable political future for him. In an effort to consolidate and prolong his hold on power, Mirza, in collaboration with General Ayub Khan, imposed martial law. This act not only marked a significant deviation from constitutional governance but also created a precedent for military involvement in national politics. General Ayub Khan, seizing the opportunity, capitalized on this intervention to dismantle the parliamentary democratic system in Pakistan, thereby entrenching military dominance in the country's political landscape (Rafiq, [n.d.](#)).

The Ayub Khan Era: Controlled Democracy and Military Rule (1958–1968)

On October 7, 1958, General Ayub Khan led a military coup in Pakistan and dissolved national and provincial assemblies. At the same time, the military announced its control over various radio and telegraph stations, including those in Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Dhaka. The military also took control of the ports in Karachi and Chittagong. Martial Law was enacted as a result of politicians' failure to uphold their integrity in the eyes of the nation's citizens. People at that time supported the new system and believed in military power (Ziring, [2003](#)).

During the first ten years of the establishment of Pakistan, there was a significant trend of disability in domestic politics. However, due to the lack of strong political parties, political destabilization produced evil instead of good, the logical result of which was manifested in the form of the military coup of 1958. As soon as martial law was implemented, the market of domestic politics naturally changed. Politicians were divided into many factions and small parties (Ahmad, [1996](#)).

After seizing power, Ayub Khan ruthlessly crushed the opposition. He described political parties as divisive forces and politicians as corrupt, selfish, and incompetent. Therefore, he imposed a total ban on political parties, sealed their offices in all major cities, and confiscated the records and bank accounts of major political parties like Pakistan Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Kirshk Sarmak Party, and Awami League, etc. (Afzal, [1987](#)). Like civil servants, another law was enacted to disqualify politicians and face inquiry before tribunals appointed by the president or governor. The Electoral Bodies (Disqualification) Order, 1959 (known as EBDO) defined the misconduct of a politician as a subversive activity. Committing political instability, corruption, or if he has any crime, the general or persistent reputation for favouritism, nepotism, willful misconduct, willful misuse and diversion of public money, and any other abuse of power or position. The scope of the law was wide as electoral bodies included any assembly, board, or committee whose

constituents were elected by election and included legislatures, municipal bodies, cantonment boards, and district boards. Clearly, under this strict law, many leading politicians like Suhrawardy, Qayyum Khan, and Ayub Khoro were disqualified. The law especially had been heavily criticized both legally and politically. With this order, 50 Politicians of national stature and reputation were deliberately humiliated in the tribunals. More than 6,000 people holding public positions were expelled from party politics (Ahmad, [2004](#)). In order to establish a strong dictatorship, Ayub Khan prohibited student federations and political activity while simultaneously defending Pakistani rule by using section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) (Waseem, [1994](#)).

During the period of Ayub Khan, many restrictions were imposed on the media, due to which the media and the press had to face many hardships. This was the reason that the media was completely in the hands of the government, and the press was not free. Newspapers like Pakistan Times, Imrooz, and Mashreq completely went into the hands of the government. During this period, the National Press Trust was established, under which all the papers went to the public after the government's approval. In 1960, Ayub Khan introduced an ordinance aimed at dealing with all printing presses. Therefore, the collection of security deposits for the printing of newspapers and books and otherwise prevent the publication of newspapers and books (Sohail et al., [2021](#)).

In order to oversee Pakistan's government, Ayub Khan established "the Basic Democracy System." Therefore, under this system, elections were held in January 1960. Ayub Khan received a 95.6% vote of confidence from Basic Democracies Units after winning 75,283 out of 80,000 votes. During the period of 1958 to 1962, the Basic Democracies system flourished and developed. Consequently, a new constitution was introduced on March 1, 1962. In April 1962, the national assembly and in May 1962, the provincial assembly was preceded by the basic democrats who were elected as the representatives of the people (Khan, [1967](#)). In the 1965 presidential elections between Fatima Jinnah and Ayub Khan, the latter extensively utilized state machinery and leveraged the 'Basic Democracies System' to secure his victory (Kamran, [2008](#)). Soon after the elections in 1965, a war between India and Pakistan over the dispute of Kashmir was fought, but after stopping the American aid, Ayub Khan's foreign policy was shaken (Jalal, [1995](#)). In the war of 1965, only one division of the army was responsible for the security of East Pakistan, due to which the eastern part of Pakistan remained at the mercy of India. Meanwhile, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was foreign minister, made a statement in the National Assembly that East Pakistan was saved by China. It was for this reason that many questions arose regarding the defence of East Pakistan, of which the Awami League took full advantage and adopted a position that "East Pakistan cannot face external threats until it becomes independent in its own affairs and owns its own resources" (Mehmood, [1990](#)).

Ayub Khan's authoritarian politics took a new turn when the Tashkent Agreement was signed in January 1966 between Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Ayub Khan. Under which the war of 1965 has been inconclusive for Pakistan (Rabbani, [2011](#)). On February 5, 1966, Sheikh Mujib presented the Six-Point Scheme, advocating for provincial autonomy, which marked a significant step toward the eventual separation of East Pakistan. This was the first time the Awami League openly demanded secession, further deepening the divide between East and West Pakistan. By 1968, tensions escalated when Sheikh Mujib and thirty-four military officers were accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. This sparked a nationwide student movement demanding Mujib's release. Facing mounting public pressure, the government freed Mujib and the others on February 22, 1969. Earlier, on January 4, 1969, the East Pakistan Student Union formed the Student Action Committee, leading anti-Ayub protests across both wings of Pakistan. These events intensified the push for greater autonomy and, ultimately, independence for East Pakistan (Suvra, [2021](#)).

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Ayub Khan invited all political parties for talks to resolve the crisis. However, the negotiations failed to yield any results, leading to further escalation. Insurgency and civil unrest erupted in East Pakistan, deepening the turmoil. Faced with mounting pressure, Ayub Khan stepped down on March 25, 1969, handing over power to General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan ("Exit stage left", [2014](#)).

The Yahya Regime (1969–1971): An Era of Political Polarization in Pakistan

After the resignation of Ayub Khan, General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan became the new Chief Martial Law Administrator and President of Pakistan on March 25, 1969 ("Exit stage left", [2014](#)). Yahya Khan, who followed in the

political footsteps of Ayub Khan, lacked any political background. To maintain the status quo until a new constitution was adopted, Yahya Khan issued an "Interim Constitutional Order" under which Pakistan was governed by the 1962 Constitution. The 156-member National Assembly became feeble in comparison to the executive's powers under the 1962 constitution, which military leaders like Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan assigned with all political powers under a presidential administration. As was the case under Ayub Khan's rule, the courts' fundamental rights, which were incorporated in the 1962 constitution, were suspended, and they lacked the authority to issue any orders that would have overruled the Chief Martial Law Authority's judgments. One may argue that throughout military regimes, these limitations on the executive, legislative branch, and judicial branches strengthened and solidified continual military supremacy and eliminated the possibility of the establishment of democratic institutions. Yahya Khan appointed advisers from the Ayub Khan administration to new positions as he lacked political expertise (Altaf, [2019](#)).

After assuming the Government, given the situation, Yahya Khan held a press conference in which he said that the elections would be held on the basis of direct adult voting at the appropriate time and that the task of drafting the constitution would be interesting to the elected representative of the people. It was only a short time after General Yahya's martial law was imposed that the uncertainty that had been going on for some time gradually disappeared as the government had convinced the people that it had neither political ambitions nor was willing to extend its reign after it has become abundantly clear that the Yahya's martial law was very different from the previous martial (Ahmad, [2004](#)).

With time, it became clear that Yahya was a weak leader in terms of military power, and his advisors were not capable of running the administrative machinery of the country. Meanwhile, Yahya himself did not have the qualities of a competent and capable army General and Martial Law Administrator. In East Pakistan, the lack of cooperation between the Martial Law authorities and the civil administration was evident. Hence, dealing with the worsening situation of East Pakistan and public problems required a full and all-out effort, but Yahya's government was not capable of understanding the public demands (Mehmmud, [1990](#)).

General Yahya Khan announced the election date in November 1969 for October 1970. In the meantime, he announced the Legal Framework Order (LFO) and abolished One Unit in March 1970. Nevertheless, the elections took place in December 1970 in a relatively calm and favourable condition (Jalal, [1995](#)). These elections were considered the first general elections which were held under the formulated mechanism (Ahmar, [2020](#)). In the case of West Pakistan, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was very strong in position similarly. In East Pakistan, the Awami League (AL) of Shaikh Mujib-ur-Rehman was in a very strong position.

Table I

National Assembly 1970 Election Results

Name of Parties	East Pakistan	West Pakistan	Reserved seats	Tribal Seats	Total Seats
Awami League	160	----	7	----	167
Pakistan People's Party	----	81	5	----	86
Muslim League (Qayyum)	----	9	----	----	9
Muslim League (Council)	----	7	----	----	7
NAP (Wali)	----	6	1	----	7
Muslim League (Convention)	----	2	----	----	2
Jamat-e-Islami	----	4	----	----	4
Jamiat-e-Ulma-e-Pakistan	----	7	----	----	7
Jamiat-e-Ulma-e-Islam	----	7	----	----	7
PDP	1	----	----	----	1
Independent	1	8	----	7	16
Total	162	131	13	7	313

Source: Data adapted from 1970 Election and Its Results, by JhotPotInfo, [2022](#), March 3.

The table shows the position of different parties in the elections of the national assembly. Awami League of Shaikh Mujib had a landslide victory in the National Assembly with 160 and 7 reserved seats, and 2 had other parties in East Pakistan. Meanwhile, Bhutto's PPP emerged as the second largest party in the country based in West Pakistan, with 81 and 5 reserved seats; moreover, 57 seats had other parties and independent candidates (Rizwan, [2014](#)). Awami League was in the majority after the 1970 election results. The elected assembly had to draft a constitution for the country within 120 days during its first session. General Yahya Khan announced the holding of the first session of the Assembly on March 3, 1971. However, Yahya Khan's decision to postpone the assembly's inaugural session went in favour of Bhutto, but this decision demarcated between East and West Pakistan, which, after a short time, led to political and social division (Mehdi, [2012](#)).

Shaikh Mujib was very disappointed with General Yahya's step and announced a 5-day strike in East Pakistan. Yahya invited 12 parties on 10th March at Dhaka for the purpose of solving conflicts, but Shaikh Mujib denied it. After that, Yahya Khan announced on 6th March the assembly meeting should be held on 25th March. On 7 March, Shaikh Mujib reacted and put forward demands like Martial law withdrawal, military person's withdrawal to their barracks, Army killing inquiries in East Pakistan, and powers transfer to electorates, after which Shaikh Mujib ended the general strike (MacDermot, [1972](#)). The atmosphere of Dhaka started echoing the slogans of Jea Bangla and Jea Bangabandhu. Shaikh Mujib had further organized his succession movement, and now it was clear that it became difficult for East and West Pakistan to live together. The situation in political conflicts worsened from 15 March to 17, and the meeting between Shaikh Mujib and Yahya Khan proved to be meaningless. Therefore, realizing the situation, the army was planning renewed operation while Awami League's volunteers were selectively targeting the lives and properties of non-Bengalis. On March 18, Shaikh Mujib proposed to restore the 1962 constitution with amendments. Meanwhile, Z.A. Bhutto strongly opposed it and raised the slogan "Udhar Tum Edhar Ham". The situation became tense, so on March 21, Bhutto also reached Dhaka, but Shaikh Mujib refused to meet Bhutto because he held Bhutto responsible for the massacres in Bengal (Farakh, [2022](#)). Considering the situation, preparations for the operation had gained momentum. On the evening of 21-22 March, General Tikka Khan and Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, GOC 14th division, inspected the cantonment of Dhaka. The irony was that at the same time, Yahya Khan was in Dhaka intoxicated with alcohol and busy in pleasure-making with his lady friends (Siddiqi, [2020](#)). So, an operation was decided on March 25 with the name of operation "Searchlight", and meanwhile conceived two headquarters to execute the operation; Major General Farman and Brigadier Arbab, 57 Brigade, were given charge of Dhaka and its suburbs (Salik, [1997](#)). After all, plans were finalized, and the operation was launched by the Pakistan army with the title of operation "Searchlight" against Bengalis but faced huge resistance overnight, and the roar of gunfire was heard from both sides. The miscreant Bengalis of Mukti had set up shelters in many areas. Dhaka University was their biggest centre, about seven to eight thousand Mukti youths, but after the siege of 22 Baloch, many people were killed there, and those who escaped could not resist anywhere. After three days of bloody fighting, there was peace in Dhaka. After a fierce battle, Chittagong was completely captured by the army on 31st March (Farakh, [2022](#)). During Operation "Searchlight", heavy manpower and ammunition were deployed without restraint, and all reinforcements sent to East Pakistan were utilized without hesitation (Salik, [1997](#)). There was also fierce resistance in Jasur, Kashtia, and Pamba, in which the Bengal Regiment and the rebels' police, along with the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), inflicted heavy losses on the army. Finally, these areas were also occupied by the army up to the middle of April. Operation "Searchlight" restored army control in Bengal, but it also shattered the glorification of unity. After the operation and the arrest of Sheikh Mujib, the situation became tense, and India's ambitions also appeared open to the world. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared her support and aid for the Bengalis, thereby paving the way for a potential war between India and Pakistan (Farakh, [2022](#)). Moreover, the situation was prolonged, and the flames of civil war were burning in Bengal, which India took full advantage of and started preparing for war in November 1971 (Farakh, 2022). From 3rd December 1971 to 16th December, Pakistan lost the battle after bloodshed on the border. As a result, East Pakistan became Bangladesh (Khan, [2021](#)). At last, on 16th December 1971, at the Dhaka Race Course Ground around 4 o'clock afternoon, Lt. General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, who commanded East Pakistan (Bangladesh), surrendered to Lt. General Jagjit Singh Arora of the Indian army (Siddiqi, [2020](#)).

Post-1971 Political Transformation in Pakistan

After the separation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh), Pakistan's politics turned in new directions. Yahya Khan transferred the powers to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on 20th December 1971. Bhutto was appointed as the new head of state. This was a very critical time in the history of Pakistan due to previous political blunders. Bhutto prepared a new constitution with the approval of opposition parties and promulgated it in 1973 (Zahoor, [2017](#)). However, Bhutto spent the first five years of his rule very well, but in 1976, the relations between the government and the opposition turned to political polarization, and a new alliance with the name of Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) was created (Zahra & Iqbal, [2021](#)). The general elections were held in March 1977 under the Bhutto regime, and the PPP took the heavy mandate. PNA accused Bhutto of rigging in elections and thus started a campaign for the purpose of getting rid of the government, adopted a slogan of enforcement of Islamic law, and imposed "Nizam-e-Mustafa" Shariat in the state. During these crises, General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) took the benefit and imposed martial law (Zahoor, [2017](#)). General Zia-ul-Haq completely abolished parliamentary politics and continued with dictatorship. He introduced Islamization policies and focused on Jihad against the Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR) in Afghanistan. For this purpose, he assisted Mujahideen and made an alliance with the USA and Saudi Arabia (Javed & Shafiq, [2022](#)). Consequently, a large number of Afghan refugees entered Pakistan; instead of these people being stopped in refugee camps, the government allowed them to move and live inside Pakistan. Resultantly, those refugees spread to different areas of Pakistan, due to which the Afghan traditions, concepts of Jihad, the guns and "Kalashnikov" culture penetrated Pakistan's society (Shah & Sareen, [2019](#)). Hence, a political turn came in the Zia government when the PPP allied with the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1981, and more than ten parties were involved due to the pressure of the alliance General Zia conducted local body elections in 1983 and nonparty elections in 1985 (Khan & Syed, [2017](#)). The August 17, 1988, death of General Zia cleared the path for the nation's democratic transition. Because of the power vacuum left by his passing, elections were held in 1988, and a civilian administration was eventually reinstated.

Benazir Bhutto's government came into existence, but in the form of opposition, Benazir had to face IJI (Islami Jamhooria Itehad). Due to differences, in 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan used Act 58 (2)B and abolished the National Assembly, and the Benazir Government ended. Later, elections were held in 1990 in which PPP formed a collation called People's Democratic Alliance (PDA), but IJI appeared with a clear advantage in the election, and Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister after a short time the relationship between the Nawaz Sharif, the opposition and establishment began to polarize, which lasted until 1993, given which President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dissolved the National Assembly by using 58(2) B act and ended Nawaz Sharif's government (Khalid & Sajid, [2021](#)). The vandalism of assemblies continued for a few more years. In 1993, the general election was held again, and Benazir Bhutto was sworn in as Prime Minister, but the assembly did not last long, and President Farooq Lagari dismissed her government due to bad relations of collation opposition as well as the corruption practices of her husband Asif Ali Zardari who was the member of the cabinet (Khan, [1996](#)). Again, Nawaz Sharif was appointed as Prime Minister of Pakistan after their victory in the 1997 election, but in 1999, after the Kargil war, clashes started between the Military establishment and Nawaz government as Nawaz Sharif tried to remove the Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf, but due to influence of Musharraf in Military, he imposed emergency and terminated Nawaz's government (Kaushik, [2017](#)).

During the democratic period from 1988 to 1999, politicians frequently shifted alliances while the government and opposition remained locked in constant conflict. The political landscape was deeply polarized, leading to repeated deadlocks. As a result, legislative assemblies were dissolved and reconstituted multiple times. This ongoing power struggle created sharp political divisions, and the broader society also suffered from the instability and fallout of this political tug-of-war (Hussain, [2005](#)).

Political Polarization in 21st-Century Pakistan

The 9/11/2001 event altered the political and geographical dynamics globally. The United States accused Al-Qaeda's leadership of orchestrating these assaults and requested that the Afghan Taliban government surrender them, but the Taliban refused to comply. Therefore, the US pressured Pakistan's government to help USA/NATO forces in operations in Afghanistan. President Pervez Musharraf associated with the USA as a non-NATO ally. During this period,



parliamentary political activity was absent, yet Pakistan encountered numerous challenges, particularly the escalation of terrorism and extremism due to its policies (Javed et al., [2022](#)). The conflict between Pervez Musharraf and the judiciary intensified in March 2007 when nationwide protests erupted following the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. By July 2007, Chaudhry was reinstated after the Red Mosque incident. Later in that year, Musharraf won the presidential elections held in October and November, though his victory was challenged in court. The judiciary ultimately upheld his re-election. Amid the political turmoil, former Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan to launch their election campaigns. However, the situation took a tragic turn when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in a terrorist attack in December 2007. Facing mounting pressure, Musharraf resigned from office in 2008 ("Pakistan Profile", [2019](#)).

Following the 2008 elections, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) secured the majority of seats in the General Assembly, leading to the establishment of a civilian democratic government after years of military rule. Asif Ali Zardari was elected as Pakistan's president, marking a significant transition (Mehdi, [2013](#)). From 2008 to 2013, the PPP maintained governance, with Zardari managing political divisions through negotiations and alliances with opposition parties, ensuring the National Assembly completed its full five-year term. This period represented a major achievement for Pakistan's democratic system ("Special Report", [2017](#)). Meanwhile, Nawaz Sharif established his government after the elections of 2013 with a sliding victory and gained 244 votes out of 342. At that time, Pakistan faced economic challenges as well as extremism was at its peak ("Pakistan Nawaz Sharif", [2013](#)). During this period, political polarization intensified when PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) launched its street protests in 2014. The party staged a 126-day-long sit-in (dharna) at Islamabad's D-Chowk, accusing Nawaz Sharif of rigging the 2013 elections to secure a sweeping victory. However, the protest came to an end following the tragic APS (Army Public School) attack, after which PTI pledged its support for the government's efforts in the war against terrorism ("Imran Khan Announces", [2014](#)). During the 2018 elections, the PTI emerged with 151 seats, and Imran Khan was elected Prime Minister after forming a coalition, gaining 176 votes in the National Assembly. However, his government soon encountered a worsening political climate as opposition parties intensified their resistance in the assembly (Hashim, [2018](#)). Political disintegration was started when PDM (Pakistan Democratic Movement), the 11 parties alliance formed in 2020 against the PTI government, and Molana Fazl-ur-Rehman (founder of JUI-F) was appointed as President ("Pakistan Fazlur Rehman", [2020](#)). Due to the rising inflation, PDM announced "Inflation March" on 23rd March 2022 throughout Pakistan ("PDM to go ahead", [2022](#)). With hard struggle, PDM leadership haired some parties for a no-confidence motion against the PTI government ("PDM announces no-trust", [2022](#)). On 10th April 2022, a no-confidence motion was successful against Prime Minister Imran Khan. It was the first time in the history of Pakistan an elected Prime Minister could not secure 172 votes. The PTI government was ended, and Shahbaz Sharif was sworn in as the new Prime Minister with the securing of 174 votes (Chaudhry, [2022](#)). After that, PTI leadership refused the result of a no-confidence motion and claimed the military Establishment and USA involvement in the regime change operation, but the establishment refused the claim of Imran Khan ("Imran accuses General", [2022](#)). Imran Khan announced a long march, which was started on 25 May, against the PDM government due to the political condition of the country ("Get ready for Islamabad", [2022](#)). Unfortunately, the PTI leadership opted to resign from the National Assembly, with their resignation letters being presented to the Speaker of the National Assembly (Zaafir, [2022](#)). In this situation, instead of addressing public issues in the assembly, every political party was focused on demonstrating its political strength on the streets. As a result, they resorted to taking their conflicts to the streets, leading to both political and social divisions (Suno News HD, [2023](#)).

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Pakistan's political development reveals a recurring pattern of polarization, institutional fragility, and democratic disruption. The initial failure to establish a stable constitutional framework led to the delayed adoption of the 1956 Constitution and the imposition of the first martial law in 1958. Military regimes, starting with Ayub Khan and continuing under Yahya Khan, suppressed democratic processes and marginalized civilian political actors. The denial of an electoral mandate to the Awami League in 1970 not only intensified political polarization but also catalyzed social fragmentation, culminating in the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Rather than drawing

lessons from these national crises, successive political leaderships engaged in power struggles, as seen in the confrontation between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the PNA, which led to General Zia-ul-Haq's prolonged martial law and the rise of religious extremism. The 1990s witnessed a fragile return to parliamentary democracy, yet personal rivalries between major political parties hindered institutional consolidation. General Musharraf's 1999 emergency further interrupted democratic progression. Although the democratic process resumed post-2008, the political culture remained deeply adversarial. The escalation of street politics and electoral disputes, particularly from 2014 onward, has contributed to growing ideological and political divisions. The formation of the PDM and the ousting of the PTI government in 2022 reflect the continuation of zero-sum politics, where governance is often subordinated to partisan contestation. This study concludes that the structural issues rooted in Pakistan's early political history, i.e. civil-military imbalance, weak democratic institutions, and elite-driven polarization, continue to manifest in contemporary politics. This study also finds that the disintegration of Pakistan in 1971 resulted from the imposition of martial law on two occasions from 1958-1971, first under General Ayub Khan and later under General Yahya Khan, as well as the conflicts between East and West Pakistan's political parties and the military establishment, which fueled political instability and polarization. However, even after 1971, Pakistan's political leadership and military establishment failed to learn from past mistakes, leading to two more military dictatorships under General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf. During this period, politicians engaged in power struggles, undermining one another in their pursuit of authority. This ongoing game of political manoeuvring persisted until 2022, deepening social and political polarization along ideological lines, a divide that remains unresolved in the present. The current climate of intensified division bears striking resemblance to past episodes of disintegration, underscoring the urgent need for political reconciliation, institutional reform, and democratic maturity to prevent the repetition of those historical mistakes, which kept Pakistan behind in economic and democratic development and progress. Rather, it requires ensuring national cohesion.

References

- Afzal, M. R. (1987). *Political Parties in Pakistan 1958-1969*. Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research.
- Ahmad, I. (1996). *Pakistan Ki Siyasat Ka Pehla Awami-o-Hangami Dur*. Lahore: Anjuman Khuda-mul-Quran.
- Ahmad, N. (2004). *Political Parties in Pakistan: A Long Way Ahead*. Islamabad: Centre for Democratic Governance.
- Ahmar, M. (2020, December 11). How 1970 elections led to the break-up. *The Express Tribune*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2275471/how-1970-elections-led-to-the-break-up>.
- Altaf, H. (2019). *History of Military Interventions in Political Affairs in Pakistan* (Master Thesis). New York: City University of New York.
- Chaudhry, F. (2022 April, 9). Imran Khan loses no-trust vote, prime ministerial comes to unceremonious end. *Daily Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1684168>
- Craig, B. (2007). *Diaries of Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Exit stage left the movement against Ayub Khan. (2014, August 31). *Daily Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1128832>.
- Farakh, Z. I. (2022). *Bichar Gay: Saniyah Mashrafee Pakistan Ki Tagziyatee Khud Nosht*. Jehlum: Book Corner.
- Flashback: The Martial Law of 1958. (2011, October 8) *Daily Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/664894/flashback-the-martial-law-of-1958?ref=hir.harvard.edu>.
- Get ready for 'Islamabad march'. (2022 April, 23). *The Express Tribune*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2353926/get-ready-for-islamabad-march>
- Hamid, S. S. (1993). *Early Years of Pakistan: Including the Period from August, 1947 to 1959*. Lahore: Feroz sons.
- Hashim, A. (2018 August, 17). Imran Khan elected as Pakistan's Prime Minister. *Aljazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2008/8/17/imran-khan-elected-as-pakistans-prime-minister>.
- Hussain, Z. (2005). *The politics of Service Delivery in Pakistan: Political Parties and the Incentives for Patronage 1988-1999*. Washington DC: South Asia Poverty Reduction and Economic Management.
- Imran accuses General Bajwa of 'double game' against his government. (2022 December 5). *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/world-news-politics/imran-accuses-general-bajwa-of-double-game-against-his-government-1168493.html>
- Imran Khan Announces end of PTI protests. (2014 December, 17). *Daily Dawn*. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151434>.
- Jalal, A. (1991). *The State of Martial Rule: The origins of Pakistan's political economy of defense*. Lahore: Vanguard Books.
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cape Town: Cambridge University Press.
- Javed, M. T & Shafiq, M. (2022). Afghanistan Factor in Enhancing Extremism and Terrorism in FATA. *Global Foreign Policies Review*, V(II), 66-77. [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2022\(V-II\).07](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2022(V-II).07).
- Javed, M. T., Shafiq, M & Azhar, M. (2022). A Saga of Decisive Combat of Pakistan Army in North and South Waziristan (2009-2016). *Global Strategic and Security Review*, VI(II), 61-72. [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsssr.2022\(VI-II\).08](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsssr.2022(VI-II).08).
- Kamran, T. (2008). *Democracy and Governance in Pakistan*. Lahore: South Asia Partnership-Pakistan Haseeb Memorial Trust Building.
- Kaushik, RK. (2017, July 29). The rise and fall of Nawaz Sharif. *The Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/the-rise-and-fall-of-nawaz-sharif-443676>
- Khalid, I., & Sajid, A. (2021). Power Sharing in Pakistan: A Failed Experience from 1988-1999. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 5(1), 218-230. [http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021\(5-I\)18](http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021(5-I)18).
- Khan, H. (2005). *Constitutional and Political History of Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, I., & Syed, K. H. (2017). General Muhammad Zia Ul Haq and Non Party Politics in Pakistan: An Analysis. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 1(1), 174-185. [http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2017\(1-I\)14](http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2017(1-I)14)

- Khan, K. (1996, November 5). Bhutto Out As Premier in Pakistan. *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/11/5/bhutto-out-as-prime-minister-in-pakistan/>.
- Khan, M. A. (1967). *Friends Not Masters: A political Auto Biography*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, N., and Fahad, S. (2018). Historical Review of political Instability and Economic Growth of Pakistan. *Developing Country Studies*, 8 (9), 9-18.
- Khan, S. U. Translate. Amin, M. (2021). *Mashrafee Pakistan Sai Bangladesh Tak*. Lahore: Dua Publications.
- MacDermot, N. (1972). *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971*. Geneva: The Secretary of the International Commission of Jurists.
- Malik, I. H. (2008). *The History of Pakistan*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Mehdi, T. (2012, December 17). Revisiting 1971: What if they elected traitors?. *Daily Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/771987/revisiting-1971-what-if-they-elected-traitors>.
- Mehdi, T. (2013 April, 16). An overview of 2008 general elections. *Daily Dawn*. <http://www.dawn.com/news/802815/an-overview-of-2008-general-elections>.
- Mehmmud, S. (1990). *Pakistan Kyun Toota?* Lahore: Jang Publishers.
- Milacic, F. (2021). *The Negative Impact of Polarization on Democracy*. Vienna: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Nawaz, A. (2015). Political Instability in Pakistan. *International Journal of Art & Humanity Sciences*, 2 (1), 19-22.
- Pakistan profile-Timeline. (2019 March, 4). *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12966786>.
- Pakistan: Fazlur Rehman appointed Chief for newly formed PDM alliance. (2020 October, 4). *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pakistan-fazlur-rehman-appointed-chief-for-newly-formed-pdm-alliance/storycXtV0c0FsoOmwppY3f4cmO.html>.
- Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif approved as prime minister by MPs. (2019 June, 2013). *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22767734>
- Pardesi, Y. Y. (n.d.). An Analysis of Constitution Crisis in Pakistan (1958-1959). *The Dialogue*, VII (4), 375-392. https://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/7_4/Dialogue_October_December2012_375-392.pdf.
- PDM announced no-trust motion against PM Imran's govt. (2022 February, 11). *The Express Tribune*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2343108/pdm-announces-no-trust-motion-against-pm-imrans-govt>.
- PDM to go ahead with 'anti-inflation, march to Islamabad on Pakistan Day. (2022 January, 25). *Daily Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1671432>.
- Rabbani, A. (2011, April 14). Ayub Khan blunders. *The Nation*. <https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Apr-2011/ayub-khans-blunders>.
- Rafiq, S. H. (n.d.). *Tareekh-e-Pakistan*. Lahore: Standard Book House.
- Rehman, I. U. (1982). *Public and Political Development in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Rizwan, M. (2014). The Elections 1970: From Ballot to Nowhere. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 3 (2), 28-36. [http://ajssh.leena-luna.co.jp/AJSSHPDFs/Vol.3\(4\)/AJSSH2014\(3.4-04\).pdf](http://ajssh.leena-luna.co.jp/AJSSHPDFs/Vol.3(4)/AJSSH2014(3.4-04).pdf).
- Salik, S. (1997). *Witness to Surrender*. Dhaka: The University press Limited.
- Shah, K. M., & Sareen, S. (2019). *The Mohajir: Identity and Politics in Multiethnic Pakistan*. Observer Research Foundation.
- Siddiqi, A. R. (2020). *General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan: The Rise & Fall of a Soldier*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Sohail, A., Shah, J., & Abdullah, H. (2021). An Inquiry in to the Causes of the fall of Ayub Khan. *Pakistan Review of Social Sciences*, 2(1), 70-89. <https://www.pakistanreview.com/index.php/PRSS/article/view/91>
- Special Report: After the assassination 2008-2013. (2017 December, 2). *Daily Dawn*. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1374113>.
- Suno News HD. (2023, January 27). *Exclusive Interview with Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/acPQ44fohBY?si=Vnndnh1jzAxUpall>.
- Suvra, K. I. J. (2021). Bangabandhu and Evolution of Bangladesh. *International Journal of Science and High Technologies* 25(2), 78-89.

- Syed, A. H. (1989). Factional Conflict in Punjab Muslim League. *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, 22(1), 49-73. : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3234846>
- Waseem, M. (1994). *Politics and the State in Pakistan*. Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research.
- Weber, T. J., Hydock, C., Ding, W., Gardner, M., Jacob, P., Mandel, N., Sprott, D. E. and Van Steenburg, E. (2021). Political polarization: challenges, opportunities, and hope for consumer welfare, marketers, and public policy. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 40(2), 184-205. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0743915621991103>
- Zaafir, M. S. (2022 December, 26). PTI resignations: Plan to approach NA speaker likely to hit a snag. Thenews.com.pk; The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1023919-pti-resignations-plan-to-approach-na-speaker-likely-to-hit-a-snap>
- Zahoor, M. A. (2017). Zulfikar Ali Bhutto: Political Behavior and Ouster from power. *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, 30(2), 99-110. <https://www.prdb.pk/article/zulfikar-ali-bhutto-political-behaviour-and-ouster-from-pow-7806>
- Zahra, U., Iqbali, J. (2021). Politics of alliance and its effects during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule in Pakistan. *Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal*, 5(2), 89-104. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/5.1.7>
- Ziring, L. (2003). *Pakistan: At the Crosscurrent of History*. England: One world Publications.