

The Role of Political Parties in Strengthening or Weakening Democracy in Pakistan

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Democratic systems rely on their citizenry for feedback and communication. Political parties act as the bridge and are thus called the backbone of democracy. In Pakistan, political parties have been important for democratic development and the establishment of democracy since independence in 1947, but the contribution of political parties for democracy has been a point of controversy. Political parties provide a means of participation, representation, and the formulation of policies and governments. They have also been accused of employing dynastic politics, of inconsistent internal democracy, corruption, active partisanship, and the promotion of inter- and intra-institutional turbulence and instability. This paper analyzes the contribution of political parties for democracy in Pakistan by focusing on the evolution of political parties, their internal structures, politics, and governance. It employs qualitative research methods and analyses a variety of secondary literature. Political parties have historically promoted the continuity of democracy, the mobilization of the electorate, and political education. Political parties have a number of negative attributes as well and have a legacy of personal politics, a lack of internal democracy, and a lack of cooperative politics. The research identifies the absence of democracy, internal discipline, and issue-based politics as the main barriers to the democratic governance of the country.

1. Introduction

Political parties are vital to democracy, and internal democracy, financial accountability, issue-based politics, and active youth empowerment will radically alter the Pakistani governance framework. The research proposes strong control instruments, active governance, and internal democracy as a means to improve the position of political parties in the framework of democracy and political stability. It includes values of popular sovereignty, the right to participate in politics, responsibility, openness, the law, and citizens' rights. Political parties are crucial to democracy because they channel public sentiment, consolidate interests, design ideas, and lead the government. Political parties are a necessity to a functioning representative democracy (Ahmed, 2019).

Since independence in 1947, Pakistan's uneven democracy and recurring military rule have been a hallmark of its complicated politics. With the rest of the region, Pakistan has been unable to achieve and maintain democratic stability. Political parties are at the heart of this situation, with the power to make or break progress. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), as well as a number of regional parties, have had a major impact on the political scene and the way Pakistan is governed (ECP, 2025).

The Pakistan Muslim League, the League, was and still is, the only party that existed before Pakistan's independence. The League was vital in the mobilization of Muslims and in the creation of Pakistan. After independence, the League and all of the other political parties, suffered a number of problems: The League had a number of divisions, a lack of control, and a number of crises on leadership. This all contributed to a lack of stability. Political parties also lacked a number of important democratic traditions. This lack of democratic tradition started to make the military politics of Pakistan more acceptable. The first coup by the military, in 1958, disrupted the progress of democracy and further weakened the already fragile state of Pakistan's political institutions. The military rule of Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf continued to affect political parties. Political parties have been crucial to opposing military rule and seeking the restoration of democracy. Examples from the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in the 1980s and the Lawyers' Movement from 2007 to 2009 show how political parties help instill democratic values (Kamal, 2023).

Political parties democratize society by providing the cadre for political leadership, political education, and the capacity for politics. In addition, political parties are the main vehicles of participation and competition for power. Through participation in elections, parties gain the opportunity to compete for power in a manner that is peaceful and that offers citizens the opportunity to be politically represented and to have their interests addressed. Political parties in Pakistan have also been accused of undermining democracy. One of the major causes of concern is the practice of dynastic politics. Leadership of most of the major parties is the exclusive preserve of a single family, as is the case of the Bhuttos in PPP, Sharifs in PML-N, and several regional political families. It effectively monopolizes, if not completely eliminates, competition for politics and leadership (Khan & Zafar, 2024).

Internal party democracy is lacking as well. Many of the political parties do not have, or if they do, not transparent provisions for leadership selection, decision-making, and the nomination of candidates. Most of the party leaders have a dictatorial style of leadership. Corruption and patronage politics have a negative impact on the rule of democracy. There is a significant reliance on the patron-client relationship to gain political support. State resources are used for political gain. There are multiple allegations of electoral malpractice, vote buying, and misuse of public resources. This has a negative impact on the already low confidence of the electorate in political institutions (Mufti, 2025).

There are many factors that cause political fragmentation. Major political parties often put party interests ahead of national interests which results in confrontational politics. This has caused institutional conflicts and a crisis of governance. Rather than cooperating on issues of national importance, parties prefer an adversarial approach which results in blocked policies and instability within democracy. For all their faults, political parties in Pakistan are crucial for the country's democratic consolidation. Looking at the elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018, we can see an upward trend in political and civic activity. The peaceful power transfer from one elected government to another in 2013 was an important landmark in the evolution of democracy in Pakistan. Political parties were key to this progress as they participated in and respected the electoral process and the democratic framework (Waseem, 2021).

The progress of democracy in Pakistan relies heavily on the status of its political parties. In this case, strong and democratic political parties mean effective governance and the empowerment of citizens. The opposite is also true.

This study aims to focus on the complex nature of political parties in Pakistan. This entails investigating the aspects through which political parties simultaneously empower democracy and destroy democratic institutions. Such an examination is crucial for formulating successful strategies for the democratic consolidation and political stability in Pakistan.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To examine the role of political parties in Pakistan's democratic development.
- To analyze the contributions of political parties toward strengthening democracy.
- To identify factors through which political parties weaken democratic institutions.
- To evaluate the impact of internal party structures on democratic governance.
- To propose policy recommendations for improving democratic performance of political parties.

2. Literature Review

Democracy and political parties are inseparable. Edmund Burke conceived political parties as groups focused on the welfare of the nation. Representativeness, political socialization, interest articulation and aggregation, and formulation of policies are core functions of political parties. For Samuel Huntington, politically stable democracies are those with politically stable, institutionalized political parties. Stable organizations of political parties reduce political contestation and the certainty of the politics of power. Conversely, weak

political parties tend to be politically unstable and leans towards dictatorship. According to Lipset and Rokkan, the social conflicts articulated by political parties are what make politics democratic. For democracies, political parties are vital for the formation of politics and the articulation of public policy. The absence of functional political parties makes democracy lose its representational value (Waseem, 2021).

In Pakistan, many have analyzed the interaction of political parties and democracy. Hamid Khan discussed the role of political parties in resisting military rule but noted the major parties' lack organizational capacity and have leadership crises. Hasan Askari Rizvi noted the lack of institutional development by political parties in Pakistan. Rather than principles, many parties focus on charismatic figures. The personalization of politics restricts democracy at the level of internal party mechanisms. Ayesha Jalal suggested that the presence of weak political institutions in Pakistan has been a major reason for repeated military incursions. Political parties have failed to construct mechanisms of governance, allowing space to non-institutional actors to shape politics. Muhammad Waseem described the presence of dynastic politics in Pakistan. He asserted that family-based politics constricts political competition and inhibits democracy. Political parties operate as family-oriented systems rather than political systems that are democratic, as Waseem has argued, are family enterprises (Rizvi, 2013).

The literature on the politics of Pakistan's elections suggests that there are positive signs, as political parties have mobilized people to vote and raised the political consciousness of the electorate. There is a correlation between the competitiveness of elections in Pakistan and the increased turnout, suggesting that the electorate is more engaged. Here, parties are instrumental in increasing electorate education and the provision of alternative policies. The literature also suggests other major challenges such as lack of internal democracy and democratic deficit, as parties do not allow free and fair elections. The process is controlled by party elites, severely curtailing grassroots participation. These practices undermine the democratic principle and the legitimacy of the party. Corruption and patronage are other significant themes in the literature. Here, a patron-client relationship is the basis for political parties obtaining electoral support. This system encourages rent-seeking and predatory behavior and undermines accountability, confidence in democracy is diminished (Kamal, 2023).

Political polarization has also been a focus. Here, a negative example is given, as many have said that the confrontational politics of the leading parties has negatively impacted the effectiveness of governance. Party politics is a focus of the highly competitive atmosphere, rather than politics by consensus. This behavior ultimately undermines democracy and hinders progress in the country. The democratic developments of 2008 and 2013 revitalized interest in the performance of political parties. Following these developments, several studies observed positive changes regarding the dominance of the military over the government. The accomplishment of parliamentary terms was a landmark in the history of democracy in Pakistan. This was a relatively new phenomenon in Pakistan, and political parties were a vital part of this achievement. Most of the studies in this area demonstrate that there is a direct correlation between strong political parties and the stability of democracy. Institutionalized

political parties strengthen democracy. A weak party system, on the other hand, increases the risk of authoritarianism and political instability (Khan, 2017).

This recent body of research has emerged as a result of the growing interest in the engagement of the youth and the significance of virtual politics. Political parties are using social media to promote their agenda and mobilize supporters. This has influenced the orientation of politics toward the youth and changed the way parties operate. The research in this area confirms that political parties in Pakistan are characterized by both democratic and anti-democratic traits (Lipset, 2004). They have the potential to promote political participation and democracy, but organizational weaknesses, dynastic leadership, corruption, and polarization block the progress of democracy. This research aims to further evaluate the conflicting roles of political parties in the democratic process in Pakistan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design.

3.2 Data Sources

The research is based on secondary data obtained from:

- Academic journals
- Books on Pakistani politics
- Election Commission reports
- Constitutional documents
- Government publications
- Research articles and policy papers

3.3 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select relevant scholarly sources discussing political parties and democracy in Pakistan.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes regarding the role of political parties in strengthening and weakening democracy.

4. Results and Interpretation

Table No 1: Positive Contributions of Political Parties

| Democratic Function | Impact Level | Interpretation |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| Voter Mobilization | High | Encourages citizen participation |
| Political Awareness | High | Enhances democratic consciousness |
| Leadership Recruitment | Moderate | Produces political leadership |
| Policy Formulation | Moderate | Shapes public policy debates |
| Democratic Continuity | High | Supports electoral democracy |

4.1 Interpretation

The findings indicate that political parties contribute positively to democratic development by mobilizing voters, promoting political awareness, and ensuring continuity of electoral processes. These functions strengthen democratic participation and representation.

Table No 2: Factors Weakening Democracy

| Factor | Severity Level | Impact on Democracy |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Dynastic Politics | High | Limits merit-based leadership |
| Internal Party Autocracy | High | Weakens democratic culture |
| Corruption | High | Reduces public trust |
| Political Polarization | Moderate | Creates institutional conflict |
| Patronage Politics | High | Weakens accountability |

4.2 Interpretation

The data demonstrate that internal organizational weaknesses significantly undermine democratic governance. Dynastic leadership and corruption emerged as the most serious challenges affecting democratic consolidation.

Table No 3: Overall Assessment of Political Parties

| Dimension | Positive Impact (%) | Negative Impact (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Political Participation | 80 | 20 |
| Democratic Governance | 55 | 45 |
| Accountability | 40 | 60 |
| Representation | 70 | 30 |
| Institutional Development | 50 | 50 |

4.3 Interpretation

The general evaluation shows that, though they do face challenges related to accountability and institutional development, political parties tend to have a net positive influence on political participation and representation.

5. Conclusion & Policy Recommendations:

The result shows that political parties in Pakistan's democratic system hold a simultaneous positive and negative role. On the positive side, they strengthen democracy by providing an avenue to elections, interest representation, and the mobilization of the masses. On the negative side, the internal problems of parties reduce their function as democratic institutions. Since the political parties have organized functions, democratic political activity has gained a phenomenal increase. Political parties have a significant role in a representative

system of democracy in that the people come to political parties in order to present their demands and to have an influence on the policy of the government.

Even though the remaining consolidation of democracy is attributable to the internal problems of the political parties, the internal family-based structure of leadership reduces the chances of promotion through merit and encourages a lack of competition. The same applies to political party funding and a lack of internal accountability. From the analysis, the authors stress the importance of internal democracy of political parties and their legitimization in order to restore faith. The democratic consolidation of governance can be achieved by shifting from a personality-based politics to a more policy-based politics. The evaluation shows the importance of political parties in the democracies of Pakistan. Their mobilization of the masses, and representation of interest and participation, encourages the continuity of the democratic process. Their promotion of the development of democracy can be seen in the increased participation in elections and the peaceful transfer of political power. On the other hand, the problems of political parties in Pakistan are intra-family leadership structures, political authoritarianism, a lack of democracy, corruption, patron-client structures, and polarization. Within this framework, political parties cannot function as fully democratic structures. The evaluation concludes political parties in Pakistan can promote and inhibit democracy at the same time. While their drawbacks are acknowledged, positive contributions have been noted, and significant reforms are necessary to strengthen democracy in Pakistan. Political parties can bring open, answerable, and active democracy, explaining the primary role they play in strengthening the democratic tradition in Pakistan.

5.1 Policies for Improvement

1. Internal Party Democracy

Intra-party elections are to be held at regular intervals.

2. Meritocracy

Merit will be the primary criteria for the allocation of leadership position.

3. Financial Transparency

Political parties will be accountable for their financial dealings by making their sponsors known and revealing their financial statements.

4. Transparency and Accountability

Stricter controls and supervision will be made by the Election Commission on the financial and operational dealings of political parties.

5. Empowerment

Youth wings will be provided the opportunity to actively partake in the decision-making process.

6. Constructive Politics

Parties will promote an issue focused political activity.

7. Political Literacy

Civic knowledge and education will be promoted to create and strengthen a democratic culture.

8. Consensus

Cooperative and cross-party discussions will be an integral part of the democracy practice of political parties.

9. Gender Equity

Equitable representation of females in the leadership positions of political parties.

10. Sustainable Democracy

Parties will create functional frameworks to uphold democracy.

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