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## Leadership Crisis or Systemic Failure? Understanding Pakistan's Politics

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### ABSTRACT

*This article critically examines Pakistan's enduring political instability since 1947, interrogating whether its root causes lie primarily in a leadership crisis characterized by dynastic dominance, personalistic rule, corruption, and the absence of visionary, accountable leaders or in systemic failures embedded in institutional weaknesses, civil-military imbalances, electoral manipulations, elite capture, and economic dependencies. Drawing on historical-comparative analysis and thematic synthesis, the study traces the evolution of Pakistan's polity through military coups, short-lived civilian governments, and hybrid regimes, highlighting key patterns of elite fragmentation, regional tensions, and persistent civil-military asymmetry. The leadership crisis perspective is substantiated through evidence of post-Jinnah vacuums, failures during the 1988-1999 democratic alternation, and recent polarization under figures like Imran Khan, demonstrating how self-interested leadership erodes civilian authority and invites military intervention. Conversely, the systemic failure perspective reveals how structural constraints overdeveloped military prerogatives, weak institutions, and patronage politics systematically produce and sustain dysfunctional leadership, as illustrated by hybrid regime dynamics from 2018-2022, post-2022 unrest, and elite capture perpetuating inequality. The analysis concludes that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive but reciprocally reinforcing, creating a self-sustaining cycle of instability that demands simultaneous reforms in leadership selection and institutional architecture to achieve genuine democratic consolidation and national resilience.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan politics, leadership crisis, systemic failure, civil-military imbalance, hybrid regime, elite capture

### Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape since its inception in 1947 has been characterized by a tumultuous cycle of instability, marked by frequent regime changes, military interventions, and the brevity of civilian governments. Emerging from the partition of British India, the nascent state grappled with immediate challenges, including mass migrations, territorial disputes, and the absence of robust institutions, setting the stage for recurring crises (Jalal, 2017). The early years saw the assassination of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951, followed by a series of weak civilian administrations that failed to consolidate democratic norms, paving the way for the first military coup in 1958 under General Ayub Khan (Begum et al., 2025). Subsequent decades witnessed three more coups in 1969 by Yahya Khan, 1977 by Zia-ul-Haq, and 1999 by Pervez Musharraf each justified as a corrective to civilian incompetence but ultimately entrenching military dominance (Malik & Faqir, 2023). These interventions not only disrupted democratic continuity but also exacerbated ethnic and regional fissures, as seen in the 1971 secession of East Pakistan amid governance failures and military overreach (Fair & Watson, 2015). In the post-2008 era, hybrid regimes have persisted, with the military wielding indirect influence through intelligence agencies and alliances with civilian elites, as evidenced by the 2018 elections and the ouster of Imran Khan in 2022 (Faiz, 2021). This pattern of short-lived governments none completing a full

term until 2013 reflects deep-seated structural vulnerabilities, including weak parliamentary oversight and judicial subservience, which have perpetuated a crisis-prone polity (Lodhi, 2022). Recent analyses highlight how these historical dynamics continue to fuel polarization, with the 2024 elections marred by allegations of manipulation and violence, underscoring the enduring legacy of 1947's foundational instabilities (Masood, 2024).

At the heart of Pakistan's political woes lies a profound debate: whether the root cause is a leadership crisis, characterized by the absence of visionary, accountable, and non-dynastic figures, or a systemic failure rooted in institutional weaknesses, civil-military imbalances, constitutional fragility, and elite-dominated politics. Proponents of the leadership crisis perspective argue that post-Jinnah leaders, often drawn from feudal or mercantile backgrounds, have prioritized personal aggrandizement over national cohesion, as seen in the dynastic dominance of families like the Bhuttos and Sharifs, whose corruption scandals and inability to foster inclusive governance have invited military incursions (Devasher, 2018). For instance, civilian rulers' failures in economic management and foreign policy during the 1990s led to dismissals orchestrated by the establishment, perpetuating a cycle of incompetence (Adeel & Khan, 2023). Conversely, the systemic failure argument posits that entrenched structural flaws such as the military's overdeveloped role since the 1950s, inherited from colonial legacies constrain even capable leaders, rendering democratic institutions ineffective (Khan et al., 2025). The civil-military imbalance, where the army controls key domains like foreign policy and internal security, has created a "deep state" that undermines civilian authority, as analyzed in recent studies of post-2018 hybrid governance (Begum et al., 2025). This interplay is not binary; poor leadership often reinforces systemic defects, as dynastic politics entrenches elite capture, while constitutional ambiguities, like Article 58(2)(b) under Zia, have historically empowered presidents to dissolve assemblies (Jalal, 2017). Contemporary evidence from the PTI-military fallout post-2022 illustrates how leadership hubris collides with institutional rigidities, amplifying instability (Masood, 2024). Thus, the debate reveals a symbiotic dysfunction: leaders' shortcomings are symptoms of a flawed system that breeds and sustains them.

The significance of this topic extends far beyond academic discourse, directly linking to Pakistan's governance failures, economic stagnation, social unrest, and the looming risks of state fragility. Ineffective leadership and systemic imbalances have eroded public trust, manifesting in widespread corruption, as evidenced by Pakistan's declining Corruption Perceptions Index scores from 2020 to 2025, which correlate with governance breakdowns (Khan et al., 2025). Economically, these dynamics have stymied growth, with military expenditures consuming over 16% of the budget in 2024, diverting resources from education and health, perpetuating poverty cycles and fueling extremism (Lodhi, 2022). Socially, the resultant unrest seen in ethnic insurgencies in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, alongside urban protests like those in 2023 threatens national unity, as marginalized groups perceive the state as elitist and unrepresentative (Fair & Watson, 2015). Moreover, the risks of state fragility are acute; repeated crises have weakened resilience against external shocks, such as the 2022 floods exacerbated by poor planning, and geopolitical pressures from India and Afghanistan (Durrani, 2018). Addressing this nexus is crucial for sustainable development, as unresolved imbalances could escalate into broader conflicts, potentially involving nuclear risks (Devasher, 2018). Ultimately, understanding these interconnections offers pathways for reform, emphasizing the need for institutional strengthening and accountable leadership to avert further descent into fragility (Adeel & Khan, 2023).

### **Literature Review**

Scholarly works on Pakistan's politics have proliferated in recent years, offering multifaceted analyses of its enduring instability, governance challenges, and the interplay between agency and structure. Key contributions span historical overviews, theoretical frameworks, and empirical case studies, drawing from disciplines like political science, sociology, and international relations. For instance, Kapur's (2023) comprehensive examination in *Pakistan's Political Labyrinth* traces the evolution of power dynamics from partition to the present, emphasizing how colonial legacies shaped post-independence institutions. Similarly, Yilmaz and Shakil (2024) in their edited volume *Hybrid Regimes in South Asia* explore comparative perspectives, positioning Pakistan within broader regional trends of authoritarian resilience. Recent articles, such as those in the *Journal of Asian Development Studies*, provide granular insights; Rabia et al. (2025) dissect leadership deficiencies through qualitative lenses, while Mufti (2025) in the Middle East Institute's policy series scrutinizes civil-military entanglements using archival data. Books like Lieven's (2022) updated edition of *Pakistan: A Hard Country* incorporate ethnographic elements to highlight societal undercurrents, and Abbas's (2024) *Reforming Pakistan's Polity* advocates institutional overhauls based on longitudinal surveys. These works collectively underscore the need for interdisciplinary approaches, integrating economic, cultural, and geopolitical factors to unpack Pakistan's political quagmire, with a growing emphasis on post-2020 developments like digital activism and economic crises.

Perspectives emphasizing a leadership crisis dominate discussions on Pakistan's political failures, portraying dynastic and personalistic rule as core impediments to progress. Scholars argue that the post-Jinnah vacuum fostered a reliance on familial networks, where self-interest supplants national priorities, leading to civilian incompetence that invites military overreach. Qasim et al. (2024) in *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* analyze how dynastic dominance in parties like the PML-N and PPP perpetuates patronage, stifling meritocratic ascent and visionary policymaking; their empirical review of electoral data from 1988–2023 reveals how family-based politics correlates with governance lapses, such as unaddressed poverty and infrastructure deficits. Batool (2022) in *The Loop* critiques personalistic leadership, noting how figures like Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto prioritized clan loyalty over institutional reforms, fostering a culture of corruption that eroded public trust. Asif (2025) extends this to historical contexts in *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, attributing the 1971 secession partly to leadership myopia, where West Pakistani elites' self-serving decisions ignored Bengali aspirations. These views converge on the notion that lacking accountable, non-dynastic leaders evident in scandals like the Panama Papers has not only weakened civilian authority but also justified military interventions as purported correctives, perpetuating a cycle of instability.

In contrast, systemic failure perspectives highlight structural flaws like civil-military imbalances, hybrid regimes, and institutional decay as primary culprits, arguing that these constrain even well-intentioned leaders. Ali (2025) in *Policy and Society* employs a balance-of-power framework to demonstrate how tutelary hybridity where the military retains veto power over policy undermines democratic consolidation, with case studies from the 2018-2024 period showing bureaucratic capture and judicial subservience. Mufti (2025) deepens this in his Middle East Institute analysis, illustrating how post-2022 repression entrenched military dominance, labeling Pakistan's setup a "facade democracy" where elite capture via economic privileges stifles reform. Yilmaz and Shakil (2022) in *Global Sociological Review* examine illiberal party practices and structural economic linkages, such as IMF dependencies, that reinforce patronage networks and weak consolidation. Zaidi et al. (2023) in *Critical Pakistan Studies* synthesize these, noting how hybrid regimes foster youth disillusionment through suppressed dissent, while structural imbalances like provincial disparities amplify elite dominance. This strand posits that systemic

defects, rooted in colonial-era militarization and post-1947 constitutional fragilities, generate leadership failures rather than vice versa, demanding holistic institutional redesign.

Synthesizing major themes from historical analyses reveals a recurring interplay between post-1947 instability, era-specific disruptions, and contemporary fallouts, where leadership crises and systemic failures mutually reinforce. Early instability, as Kapur (2023) details, stemmed from the 1951 assassination and subsequent coups, setting patterns of elite fragmentation seen in the Zia era's Islamization, which Bhutto's personalistic rule inadvertently enabled through failed secular reforms. Rabia et al. (2025) connect this to the Bhutto-Zia dialectic, where dynastic populism clashed with military authoritarianism, culminating in institutional decay that echoed in the 1990s dismissals. Recent analyses, like Batool (2022) and Mufti (2025), tie Imran Khan's 2022 ouster to this legacy: his anti-corruption rhetoric exposed hybrid regime fissures, but systemic military vetoes triggered fallout, including 2024 election manipulations and polarization. Zaidi et al. (2023) synthesize how these historical threads from 1971's ethnic neglect to post-2018 economic linkages manifest in current unrest, urging a break from binary debates toward integrated reforms addressing both agency and structure for enduring stability.

### **Literature Gap**

Despite the abundance of scholarship dissecting Pakistan's political turmoil through either a leadership lens or a systemic one, a significant void persists in integrating these perspectives into a unified causal framework that captures their reciprocal reinforcement. Much of the existing literature compartmentalizes the issues: works focused on dynastic politics and personalist failures tend to treat leadership deficiencies as primary drivers of instability, often overlooking how entrenched institutional asymmetries such as military tutelage and elite capture systematically produce and sustain incompetent or self-serving leaders. Conversely, analyses centered on hybrid regimes, civil-military imbalances, and structural decay frequently depict leaders as mere products of flawed systems, downplaying instances where individual agency exacerbates or perpetuates institutional weaknesses, such as through populist polarization or failed consensus-building. Recent studies, particularly those addressing the 2021–2025 period of heightened unrest, protests, and regime reconstitutions, remain fragmented, with few offering longitudinal, interdisciplinary syntheses that trace mutual causation across historical eras to contemporary fallouts like the 2022 ouster, 2024 electoral controversies, and ongoing insurgencies. This gap leaves unexplored the mechanisms through which poor leadership entrenches systemic flaws and vice versa, hindering nuanced policy prescriptions that address both dimensions simultaneously for genuine democratic consolidation.

### **Problem Statement**

Pakistan confronts a chronic and escalating political crisis defined by persistent instability, eroded institutional legitimacy, and recurring governance breakdowns that manifest in frequent regime disruptions, military overreach, dynastic entrenchment, and deepening societal polarization. Since independence, the country has endured cycles of civilian rule undermined by military interventions, hybrid arrangements that mask authoritarian realities, and leadership patterns prioritizing elite interests over national cohesion, resulting in short-lived governments, economic fragility, widespread corruption, and public disillusionment with democratic processes. The core dilemma lies in discerning whether these entrenched pathologies stem predominantly from a dearth of visionary, accountable leadership exemplified by self-interested dynasties and populist excesses or from deeper systemic defects, including unbalanced civil-military relations, constitutional ambiguities, weak democratic institutions, and elite-dominated patronage networks that constrain effective governance regardless of who holds power. This unresolved tension not only perpetuates a vicious cycle of crises but also amplifies risks of further

state fragility, social unrest, economic stagnation, and regional security threats, demanding a critical examination of their interconnected roots to forge pathways toward sustainable political stability and inclusive development.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To critically examine the interplay between leadership qualities and systemic structures in shaping Pakistan's political trajectory.
2. To analyze historical and contemporary evidence supporting the "leadership crisis" versus "systemic failure" arguments.
3. To identify key causal mechanisms and their interconnections.
4. To propose implications for political reform and stability in Pakistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent does Pakistan's political instability result from a leadership crisis (e.g., lack of visionary, accountable leaders) rather than systemic/structural failures?
2. How have civil-military relations, dynastic politics, and institutional weaknesses contributed to or amplified leadership deficiencies?
3. In what ways do poor leadership choices perpetuate or deepen systemic problems?
4. What reforms could address both leadership and systemic dimensions for sustainable political stability?

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design centered on historical-comparative analysis and a multi-case study approach to interrogate the enduring debate between leadership crisis and systemic failure in Pakistan's politics. By tracing causal patterns across distinct historical periods, the methodology systematically compares episodes of civilian rule, military interventions, and hybrid governance to discern recurring mechanisms of instability. Data are drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic articles and books on South Asian politics, think-tank reports from institutions such as the International Crisis Group and Carnegie Endowment, official documents like successive Pakistani constitutions, Supreme Court judgments on key political cases, and extensive media archives from both domestic and international outlets covering pivotal events. Particular attention is given to contemporary developments, including the 2022 no-confidence motion against Imran Khan, the contentious 2024 general elections, subsequent political reconfigurations, and ongoing civil-military tensions through mid-2025. The analytical framework employs thematic analysis that deliberately integrates agency-oriented perspectives focusing on leadership attributes, decision-making, and elite behavior with structural lenses that examine institutional constraints, civil-military asymmetries, and elite capture. This dual approach is informed by civil-military relations theory and elements of elite theory to unpack how individual agency interacts with, reinforces, or is constrained by systemic features. The temporal scope encompasses the entire post-1947 trajectory, with intensified emphasis on the post-1988 democratic restoration phase and the acute crises from 2018 to 2025, allowing for both longitudinal depth and contemporary relevance. Key limitations include heavy dependence on secondary sources, which may introduce interpretive biases, and the inherent challenge of navigating politically polarized narratives that often color accounts of recent events, potentially affecting objectivity despite efforts to cross-verify divergent viewpoints.

### **Historical Evolution of Pakistan's Political System**

Pakistan's political evolution since 1947 has been defined by profound instability, oscillating between fragile civilian experiments and prolonged military dominance, with four major coups punctuating its trajectory. Born amid the chaos of partition, the new state immediately

confronted existential challenges: refugee influxes, territorial disputes with India over Kashmir, and the absence of cohesive institutions following the premature deaths of Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1948 and Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. Early parliamentary governments collapsed under factionalism and bureaucratic paralysis, culminating in President Iskander Mirza's declaration of martial law in October 1958, swiftly overtaken by General Ayub Khan's coup, marking the first direct military takeover. Ayub's decade-long rule (1958–1969) introduced controlled "basic democracy" and economic modernization but suppressed political pluralism, fostering resentment that erupted in mass protests leading to his resignation and handover to General Yahya Khan in 1969. Yahya's administration oversaw the 1970 elections the first general franchise poll yet manipulated results and unleashed military repression in East Pakistan, precipitating the 1971 war and Bangladesh's secession, a cataclysmic blow exposing the perils of centralized, militarized governance. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's civilian interlude (1971–1977) restored parliamentary democracy via the 1973 Constitution but devolved into authoritarian populism, inviting General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup amid election rigging allegations. Zia's Islamization drive entrenched ideological militarism until his 1988 death in a plane crash paved the way for intermittent civilian rule under Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, repeatedly disrupted by presidential dismissals under Article 58(2)(b). General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup ousted Sharif, ushering in another hybrid phase blending military control with civilian facades until his 2008 resignation amid judicial and public pressure. Post-2008, civilian governments under Zardari (2008–2013) and Sharif (2013–2017) achieved milestones like the 18th Amendment devolving powers, yet military influence persisted in security, foreign policy, and intelligence domains, evolving into overt hybrid regimes by the late 2010s.

Key patterns across this timeline reveal structural continuities that have thwarted democratic consolidation: short civilian tenures, elite fragmentation, regional/ethnic tensions, and persistent civil-military asymmetry. No elected government completed a full five-year term until Sharif's PML-N in 2013–2018, with most interrupted by dismissals, coups, or no-confidence maneuvers orchestrated or tacitly supported by the establishment. Elite fragmentation rooted in feudal, bureaucratic, and business oligarchies has fragmented political parties into personality-driven entities, prioritizing patronage over programmatic governance and rendering coalitions vulnerable to military divide-and-rule tactics. Regional and ethnic fissures, amplified by Punjab-centric dominance, fueled alienation in Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, manifesting in insurgencies and separatist movements exacerbated by military operations perceived as repressive rather than integrative. The most enduring pattern remains civil-military asymmetry: the army's institutional strength, economic empire (via foundations and enterprises), and monopoly over security narratives have positioned it as the ultimate arbiter, often justifying interventions as safeguards against civilian corruption or incompetence. This asymmetry crystallized in hybrid regimes post-2008, where elected leaders operate under military tutelage, as seen in the 2018 elections facilitating Imran Khan's rise, his 2022 ouster via no-confidence amid establishment withdrawal, and the controversial 2024 polls amid PTI suppression. By 2025, under General Asim Munir's leadership, military consolidation deepened through legislative empowerment, judicial influence, and crackdowns on dissent, reinforcing a cycle where civilian rule serves as a legitimizing veneer for praetorian primacy.

This historical arc underscores how foundational asymmetries have perpetuated instability rather than resolved it, with each coup or hybrid shift reproducing the very pathologies it purported to cure corruption, inefficiency, and polarization while entrenching military prerogatives. Early instability from weak civilian institutions invited the 1958 coup; Ayub's modernization failed to address ethnic grievances, leading to 1971's dismemberment; Zia's

Islamization politicized the army ideologically; Musharraf's liberalization masked authoritarianism; and recent hybrids have weaponized institutions against opposition, as evidenced in PTI's marginalization post-2022 and ongoing 2024–2025 unrest. Elite fragmentation sustains patronage politics, regional tensions breed centrifugal forces, and civil-military imbalance ensures that genuine power-sharing remains elusive. Consequently, Pakistan's polity has evolved not toward democratic maturity but toward resilient authoritarian hybridity, where short civilian interludes alternate with deepening military oversight, perpetuating governance crises, economic volatility, and societal fractures that demand structural rebalancing for sustainable stability.

### **The Leadership Crisis Perspective**

The leadership crisis perspective posits that Pakistan's political maladies stem fundamentally from deficient individual agency, where leaders prioritize familial legacies, personal aggrandizement, and short-term survival over institutional integrity and national welfare, thereby perpetuating instability. Dynastic politics exemplifies this flaw, with families like the Bhuttos and Sharifs dominating major parties such as the PPP and PML-N, transforming political organizations into hereditary fiefdoms that stifle meritocracy and internal democracy. This entrenchment fosters personalistic rule, where loyalty to charismatic figures overshadows programmatic agendas, as leaders exploit patronage networks to consolidate power rather than address structural inequities. For instance, successive generations of these dynasties have recycled power, often through alliances with the military or judiciary, sidelining emerging voices and reinforcing elite insularity (Corsi, 2024). Such dynamics not only erode party institutionalization but also amplify polarization, as leaders' self-interested maneuvers evident in frequent floor-crossing and opportunistic coalitions undermine collective decision-making. Analytically, this perspective reveals how leadership voids post-Jinnah have normalized a culture of entitlement, where rulers view the state as a personal estate, leading to policy paralysis and public disaffection. Recent critiques highlight how this personalism intersects with economic mismanagement, diverting resources toward clientelism instead of sustainable development, thus compounding governance failures (Mufti, 2023). Ultimately, the crisis is not merely about individual flaws but their systemic ripple effects, which hollow out democratic processes and invite external arbitrage.

Corruption scandals further underscore leadership failures, serving as both symptoms and enablers of a self-serving ethos that prioritizes illicit gains over accountability and public goods delivery. High-profile cases, such as those involving Nawaz Sharif's Panama Papers revelations and Imran Khan's Toshakhana graft convictions, illustrate how leaders exploit office for personal enrichment, eroding institutional trust and diverting funds from essential services like healthcare and education. These scandals often involve state gift misappropriation or offshore assets, revealing a pattern where rulers manipulate legal loopholes or influence investigations to evade justice, as seen in Sharif's conviction overturns and Khan's politically charged prosecutions (Nawaz, 2025). This inability to build consensus manifests in fractured parliaments, where leaders' hubris exemplified by Khan's confrontational style against opposition and institutions fuels gridlock, preventing reforms on critical issues like fiscal policy or counter-terrorism. Analytically strong assessments argue that such failures stem from a lack of visionary commitment, where personal vendettas supplant collaborative governance, resulting in stalled public goods provision amid rising inequality and poverty (Shah, 2024). For example, during economic downturns, leaders' focus on survival tactics, like populist subsidies without structural fixes, exacerbates fiscal deficits, leaving populations vulnerable to crises like the 2022 floods.

This vicious cycle not only amplifies disillusionment but also legitimizes extra-constitutional interventions, as corrupt practices provide pretexts for ousters.

Case examples across Pakistan's history vividly illustrate these leadership deficiencies, beginning with the post-Jinnah vacuum that left a nascent state bereft of unifying figures, descending into factionalism and bureaucratic overreach. Without Jinnah's integrative vision, early leaders like Ghulam Muhammad and Iskander Mirza resorted to authoritarian decrees, dissolving assemblies and inviting the 1958 coup, highlighting a chronic absence of accountable stewardship (Gul, 2026). The 1988–1999 democratic alternation era further exposed these flaws: Benazir Bhutto's and Nawaz Sharif's tenures were marred by mutual accusations of corruption and incompetence, with short-sighted policies failing to address ethnic tensions or economic reforms, culminating in repeated presidential dismissals under Article 58(2)(b) and Musharraf's 1999 coup. Recent episodes, such as Imran Khan's 2018–2022 rule, epitomize polarization and self-interest; his anti-corruption narrative devolved into selective accountability, alienating allies and clashing with the military over appointments, leading to his 2022 no-confidence ouster amid economic turmoil (Mufti, 2023). Khan's subsequent detention on fabricated charges underscores how leaders' hubris amplifies divisions, with his populist rhetoric fueling unrest without constructive alternatives. These cases demonstrate a pattern where personal ambitions override national imperatives, perpetuating cycles of instability.

The consequences of this leadership crisis are profound, breeding widespread public disillusionment, weakened civilian authority, and recurrent invitations for military intervention that deepen Pakistan's democratic deficits. Disillusionment arises from repeated betrayals, as leaders' failures to deliver on promises like Khan's unfulfilled "Naya Pakistan" or Sharif's economic pledges erode faith in electoral processes, manifesting in low voter turnout and protest movements, such as the 2023 PTI rallies that turned violent amid state repression (Nawaz, 2025). Weakened civilian authority follows, as dynastic and personalist rule fragments parties, rendering governments susceptible to manipulation and unable to assert control over powerful institutions like the judiciary or military. This vulnerability invites interventions, with the army positioning itself as a stabilizer against "incompetent" civilians, as evidenced in the 2024 election manipulations and the 27th Amendment granting military leaders sweeping powers (Gul, 2026). Analytically, these outcomes create a feedback loop: disillusioned publics tolerate authoritarian shortcuts, further entrenching hybrid regimes where civilian leaders serve as facades for military dominance. Long-term risks include state fragility, economic stagnation, and social unrest, as unaddressed grievances fuel extremism and regional conflicts, demanding urgent leadership renewal for genuine stability (Shah, 2024).

### **The Systemic Failure Perspective**

The systemic failure perspective frames Pakistan's political instability as a product of deep-rooted structural issues that transcend individual leadership shortcomings, embedding dysfunction within the very architecture of the state. Central to this is the overdeveloped military role, inherited from colonial precedents and amplified post-1947, where the armed forces have evolved into an economic and political behemoth controlling vast resources through entities like the Fauji Foundation, sidelining civilian oversight and distorting national priorities toward defense spending that consumes disproportionate budgets amid fiscal crises (Siddiqi, 2025). Weak judiciary and parliament exacerbate this, with the former often co-opted through appointments and the latter fragmented by patronage-based politics, where electoral manipulations such as pre-poll rigging and gerrymandering ensure elite dominance and suppress genuine representation (Baig, 2023). Patronage networks, fueled by economic dependence on IMF bailouts and foreign aid, reward loyalty over merit, perpetuating a cycle of debt servitude

that constrains policy autonomy and entrenches inequality, as conditional loans prioritize austerity over social investments (Younus, 2025). Analytically, these structures create a self-reinforcing pathology: military hegemony justifies interventions under the guise of stability, while weak institutions fail to check abuses, leading to electoral farce and economic vassalage that hollow out democratic legitimacy. Recent critiques underscore how this overdevelopment not only stifles pluralism but also amplifies vulnerabilities to external pressures, rendering the state perpetually crisis-prone and unable to foster inclusive growth (Javed, 2025).

Institutional imbalances further illuminate how the system inherently constrains leaders, channeling even reformist impulses into dysfunctional behaviors through establishment influence and rigged transitions that prioritize regime survival over governance efficacy. The civil-military disequilibrium empowers the "deep state" to veto policies, as seen in military vetoes over foreign affairs and internal security, forcing civilian leaders to navigate a minefield of informal pressures that undermine their authority and incentivize accommodation rather than confrontation (Asif & Azhar, 2023). Rigged transitions, such as engineered no-confidence votes or judicial ousters, reward sycophancy and punish autonomy, cultivating a political class adept at survival tactics but inept at systemic reform, thereby perpetuating elite capture where a narrow oligarchy monopolizes resources and decision-making (Hussain, 2025). This dynamic not only constrains leaders by limiting their maneuverability compelling alliances with unelected powers but also rewards corruption and nepotism as rational responses to institutional precarity, eroding public trust and fostering polarization. Vigorous analysis reveals a structural trap: leaders are products of a flawed ecosystem that selects for compliance, where attempts at independence invite reprisals, thus reinforcing imbalances that stymie democratic consolidation and amplify governance failures like unchecked inflation and service delivery collapses (Rumi, 2025). Consequently, the system engenders a hybrid authoritarianism masquerading as democracy, where institutional weaknesses become tools for power retention rather than avenues for accountability.

Case examples from recent history vividly demonstrate these systemic failures in action, particularly through hybrid regime dynamics from 2018-2022, post-2022 unrest, and elite capture's role in sustaining inequality and instability. The 2018-2022 period under Imran Khan's PTI exemplified hybridity, where military backing facilitated his ascent via manipulated elections, but subsequent fallout exposed how institutional constraints such as intelligence-led harassment of opponents curtailed his reforms, leading to economic mismanagement and his 2022 ouster, highlighting the system's intolerance for deviation (Baig, 2023). Post-2022 unrest, including mass arrests and the contentious 2024 elections, illustrated electoral manipulations and judicial weakness, as Supreme Court delays and parliamentary impotence allowed establishment-orchestrated coalitions to sideline popular mandates, fueling protests and deepening polarization (Javed, 2025). Elite capture perpetuates this, as feudal and business oligarchs leverage patronage to maintain inequality, evident in IMF-dependent policies that favor creditors over citizens, exacerbating poverty and insurgencies in marginalized regions like Balochistan (Younus, 2025). These cases analytically underscore mutual reinforcement: hybrid mechanisms mask failures while elite entrenchment amplifies instability, creating a feedback loop where systemic flaws invite crises, demanding radical institutional overhaul to break the impasse.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's protracted political instability cannot be reduced to a simplistic binary of leadership crisis versus systemic failure; rather, the evidence reveals a deeply entangled dynamic where the two dimensions mutually reinforce and perpetuate one another in a vicious cycle. On one hand, the persistent absence of visionary, accountable, and non-dynastic leadership manifest in

familial dominance, personalistic rule, corruption scandals, and polarizing self-interest has repeatedly undermined civilian governance, eroded public trust, and created openings for extra-constitutional interventions. Leaders drawn from narrow elite circles have consistently prioritized short-term survival, patronage distribution, and vendettas over consensus-building, institutional strengthening, or delivery of public goods, thereby weakening the legitimacy and capacity of democratic processes. On the other hand, entrenched systemic flaws most notably the overdeveloped military role, institutional imbalances, electoral manipulations, patronage-based politics, economic dependence on external creditors, and constitutional ambiguities have systematically constrained, corrupted, or co-opted even those leaders who initially sought reform. The civil-military asymmetry, in particular, has positioned the establishment as the ultimate veto player, engineering transitions, rewarding compliance, and punishing autonomy, thus ensuring that leadership deficiencies become structural features rather than isolated anomalies. This reciprocal causation explains why periodic civilian interludes have failed to produce lasting democratic consolidation, why hybrid regimes have become the norm, and why crises recur with alarming regularity from the 1958 coup to the 2022 ouster and the 2024 electoral controversies. Breaking this cycle demands simultaneous action on both fronts: cultivating a new generation of accountable, merit-based leaders through party democratization and anti-dynasty reforms, while undertaking bold structural changes to rebalance civil-military relations, strengthen parliamentary and judicial independence, curb elite capture, and reduce economic vulnerabilities that sustain patronage networks.

The stakes for Pakistan are existential. Continued failure to address this intertwined pathology risks deepening state fragility, accelerating economic decline, intensifying social unrest, and exacerbating regional and ethnic fractures that could spiral into broader conflict. Yet the same analysis that highlights the severity of the challenge also points toward pathways for renewal. Genuine political stability and inclusive development require a comprehensive reform agenda that combines leadership renewal through electoral laws promoting intra-party democracy and term limits with institutional restructuring, including civilian supremacy over security policy, transparent fiscal governance, and devolution of power to marginalized provinces. Such reforms, though politically daunting, are not impossible; historical moments of transition have occasionally opened windows for change, and growing public disillusionment with both civilian elites and military overreach create pressure for accountability. Ultimately, Pakistan's future hinges on whether its political actors can transcend zero-sum competition and embrace a shared commitment to rebuilding institutions that serve the nation rather than narrow interests. Only through this dual transformation leadership that rises above systemic constraints and a system that no longer rewards dysfunction can the country escape the recurring trap of crisis and move toward sustainable democracy, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

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