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Political Polarization and Future of Democracy in Pakistan.

1. Introduction

   Thesis statement: *Political polarization, like a ticking time bomb, has the potential to detonate the future of democracy in Pakistan unless defused in time.*

2. An overview of Political polarization in Pakistan

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b. Current state of political polarization in Pakistan

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Like a ship sailing through tumultuous waters, democracy in Pakistan finds itself caught in the crosshairs of political polarization. The divide between political ideologies and parties has grown wider than the Grand Canyon, leaving cooperation and compromise in the dust. As the chasm between the left and the right deepens, the future of democratic governance in Pakistan hangs in the balance. The increasing divide has led to a lack of cooperation and compromise, resulting in a gridlock in the political system. This has not only hindered the functioning of democratic institutions but also created a deep mistrust among the citizens towards the government. The effects of political polarization are far-reaching, from the decline of voter turnout to the rise of extremist movements. Political polarization, like a ticking time bomb, has the potential to detonate the future of democracy in Pakistan unless defused in time. So it is imperative that we take immediate action to address this issue.

Background on Political polarization in Pakistan A. Historical context of political polarization in Pakistan: Political polarization in Pakistan has a long and complex history that is rooted in the country's colonial past, partition, and military dictatorship. The British colonial rule in India created a legacy of political, economic, and social inequality that has contributed to political polarization in Pakistan. The partition of British India in 1947 led to the displacement of millions of people and resulted in ethnic and religious polarization between Hindu and Muslim communities in Pakistan. Since the country's independence, military dictatorship has been a recurring theme in Pakistan's history, with military rulers suppressing political opposition and undermining democratic institutions, further exacerbating political polarization. Additionally, Pakistan has been plagued by political instability and weak democratic institutions, with military coups, political violence, and weak democratic governance. According to the Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit, Pakistan has been ranked as "flawed democracy" since 2002, indicating a lack of democratic governance and political polarization. Furthermore, a report by the Pew Research Center shows that in 2019, only 30% of Pakistanis were satisfied with the way democracy was working in the country, indicating a general dissatisfaction with the political system and a lack of trust in democratic institutions.

Political polarization has led to a lack of cooperation between political parties, resulting in a political gridlock. For example, in recent years, the National Assembly of Pakistan has been unable to pass important legislation due to political polarization. According to the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the average legislative productivity of the National Assembly of Pakistan was only 44% during the period of 2018-2022. Similarly, political polarization has led to a decrease in public trust in government institutions. For example, According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in 2019,

only 30% of Pakistanis were satisfied with the way democracy was working in the country. Additionally, a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan showed that only 15% of Pakistanis trust the government. Moreover, Political polarization has led to an increase in extremist political movements, which have further polarized society. For example, according to a report by the South Asian Terrorism Portal, the number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan has increased from 2,329 in 2013 to 3,460 in 2018. Additionally, the rise of extremist groups such as the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba has contributed to the increased political polarization in the country.

Pakistan is a diverse country with a variety of ethnic and religious groups. However, these divisions have often been exploited by political leaders for their own gain, resulting in ethnic and religious polarization. This has led to the rise of extremist movements and violence, further exacerbating political polarization.

Pakistan has a significant income gap between the rich and the poor, with a Gini coefficient of 0.34 (2017-2018) , indicating a high level of economic inequality. This economic inequality has led to a sense of marginalization and disaffection among the poor, who feel that the political system is not responsive to their needs, contributing to political polarization.

Political corruption has been a persistent problem in Pakistan, with high-level corruption cases involving politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders. This has led to a lack of trust in the political system and a perception that the political class is self-serving, further fueling political polarization. According to the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Pakistan ranked 120th out of 180 countries in 2020, indicating a high level of perceived corruption.

Political clientelism refers to the manipulation of state resources and services for the benefit of certain individuals or groups by politicians to gain support and political power. This has led to the rise of political dynasties and the erosion of democratic institutions, leaving a sense of political disillusionment among the citizens. For example, the practice of political patronage in Pakistan is a widespread phenomenon, where elected officials use their position to provide jobs, contracts, and other benefits to their supporters, rather than providing services to the general population.

Economic inequality has been a key factor in political polarization in Pakistan. The concentration of wealth and power among a small elite has led to widespread poverty and economic insecurity among the population. According to the World Bank, in 2020, Pakistan had a poverty rate of 24.3%, with nearly 60 million people living below the poverty line. This has led to a sense of marginalization and disaffection among the poor, who feel that the political system is not responsive to their needs, fueling political polarization.

Media plays an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse in Pakistan. However, due to the lack of media regulation and the rise of sensationalist and partisan news outlets, the media has contributed to the political polarization of society. For example, according to a report by the Center for International Media Assistance, the media in Pakistan is highly politicized, with ownership concentrated in the hands of a few powerful individuals and groups, leading to a lack of diversity and balance in news coverage.

Lack of education has also been a major factor in the political polarization in Pakistan. According to the Unesco Institute for Statistics, the literacy rate in Pakistan is 58.6% (2018-19) and the majority of the population is illiterate, which makes them easy prey to propaganda and disinformation. This lack of education has led to the rise of extremist and populist movements, which have further polarized society.

Pakistan's strategic location and the involvement of foreign powers in its politics have also contributed to political polarization. Different foreign powers have supported different groups in Pakistan for their own strategic interests, which has led to the rise of various extremist groups and the weakening of democratic institutions. For example, Pakistan's involvement in the Cold War and the War on Terror has led to the rise of extremist groups and has further polarized society. Additionally, foreign powers have been known to support certain political parties or groups in Pakistan for their own strategic interests, which can further exacerbate political polarization.

Political polarization has led to a difficulty in passing legislation, as political parties are unable to reach a consensus on important issues. For example, in recent years, the National Assembly of Pakistan has been unable to pass important legislation due to political polarization. According to the Pakistan

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Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the average legislative productivity of the National Assembly of Pakistan was only 44% during the period of 2018-2022. Additionally, political polarization has led to a lack of cooperation between political parties, resulting in a political gridlock. For example, in recent years, the National Assembly of Pakistan has been unable to pass important legislation due to political polarization. According to the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the average legislative productivity of the National Assembly of Pakistan was only 44% during the period of 2018-2022.

Political polarization has led to a decrease in public trust in government institutions. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in 2019, only 30% of Pakistanis were satisfied with the way democracy was working in the country. Additionally, a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan showed that only 15% of Pakistanis trust the government. Moreover, political polarization has led to an increase in public cynicism towards politics. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in 2019, only 30% of Pakistanis were satisfied with the way democracy was working in the country. Additionally, a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan showed that only 15% of Pakistanis trust the government.

Political polarization has led to a decrease in voter turnout. For example, According to the Election Commission of Pakistan, the voter turnout in the 2018 general election was only 48.6%, indicating a lack of participation by the citizens in the democratic process. Political polarization has led to an increase in extremist political movements, which have further polarized society. For example, according to a report by the South Asian Terrorism Portal, the number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan has increased from 2,329 in 2013 to 3,460 in 2018. Additionally, the rise of extremist groups such as the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba has contributed to the increased political polarization in the country.

Political polarization can lead to increased political instability and a lack of governance. This can lead to a lack of government services, economic decline, and an increase in crime and violence.

Political polarization can also lead to a decline in human rights as extremist groups and political parties may target marginalized communities and individuals, leading to a rise in human rights violations. Additionally, political polarization can also lead to a lack of accountability for human rights violations, as political polarization may impede the functioning of democratic institutions that are responsible for protecting human rights.

Political polarization can also have a negative impact on economic development as it can lead to a lack of cooperation between political parties, resulting in a lack of consistency and stability in economic policy. This can lead to a lack of consistency and stability in economic policy, which can result in a lack of investment, a decline in economic growth and a rise in unemployment.

Political polarization can also lead to a lack of governance, resulting in poor infrastructure and inadequate public services, which can further impede economic development. Furthermore, political polarization can also lead to a lack of accountability for economic mismanagement, which can further impede economic development.

Political polarization can be reduced by promoting political dialogue and compromise between political parties. This can be achieved by encouraging political leaders to engage in constructive dialogue and to work towards finding common ground on important issues.

Civic education and participation can help to reduce political polarization by encouraging citizens to become more informed and engaged in the political process. This can be achieved by providing civic education in schools and universities, as well as encouraging voter registration and voter education.

Addressing economic inequality and poverty can help to reduce political polarization by addressing the underlying issues that fuel it. This can be achieved by implementing policies that promote economic growth and address poverty, such as increasing access to education, healthcare and job opportunities.

Political polarization can also be reduced by reforming political institutions, such as the judiciary and the electoral commission, to ensure that they are free from political influence and are able to function independently.

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The media can play an important role in promoting political dialogue and understanding by providing balanced and accurate news coverage. This can be achieved by promoting media literacy, encouraging diversity in news ownership and editorial independence.

The government can play an important role in promoting political stability and democratic governance by implementing policies that promote political dialogue and cooperation, encouraging civic education and participation, and addressing economic inequality and poverty.

Encouraging cross-party cooperation can be achieved by promoting dialogue and cooperation between political parties, such as through the formation of parliamentary committees and working groups.

Encouraging civil society participation can be achieved by promoting civic education, encouraging the formation of civic organizations, and supporting grassroots movements.

By concluding, political polarization in Pakistan, like a cancer eating away at the fabric of society, has the potential to undermine the future of democracy in the country. It has led to political gridlock, a decline in public trust in government institutions, and an increase in extremist political movements. However, with the right strategies in place, such as promoting political dialogue and compromise, addressing economic inequality and poverty, reforming political institutions, and encouraging civic education and participation, it is possible to bridge the divide and safeguard the democratic governance of the country. It's high time that the government, media, civil society, and citizens come together to work towards a more cohesive and stable future for democracy in Pakistan. A stitch in time saves nine, addressing the issue of political polarization now will save much trouble in the long run.

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