

# YOUTH POLITICS

AND

# DEMOCRACY

IN PAKISTAN

AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE



Center for  
Research &  
Security  
Studies

*Rule of Law - Security - Governance*



Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.

– Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations

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## Abbreviations

- **AJK:** Azad Jammu and Kashmir
- **ANP :** Awami National Party
- **BSO :** Baloch Students Organisation
- **CPP :** Communist Party of Pakistan
- **DSF :** Democratic Students Federation
- **ECP :** Election Commission of Pakistan
- **GB :** Gilgit-Baltistan
- **HRCP :** Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
- **IJT :** Islami Jamiat Taleba
- **KP :** Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- **LSO :** Liberal Students Organisation
- **MSF :** Muslim Students Federation
- **NSF :** National Students Federation
- **PDM :** Pakistan Democratic Movement
- **PkSF:** Pakhtun Students Federation
- **PML-N :** Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
- **PPPP :** Pakistan Peoples Party
- **PSF :** Peoples Students Federation
- **PTI :** Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
- **PTM:** Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

## Context

With youth aged 15 to 29 constituting 64% of the population, as reported by UNDP, Pakistan stands at the intersection of youth empowerment and democratic engagement.<sup>i</sup> The aftermath of the recent general elections in Pakistan has sparked discussions regarding the pivotal role of young voters in shaping the country's democratic trajectory. With a median age of 22.7 years and a substantial portion of the electorate under 35, it's evident that youth wield significant influence in Pakistani politics.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite their numerical strength, the engagement of young voters remains a topic of concern. While 66% of 18-25-year-olds are registered voters, their actual turnout lags behind the national average. This discrepancy hints at a growing disillusionment among young Pakistanis with traditional political structures. Manifestos of major parties often overlook pressing youth concerns such as inflation, education, and employment. Consequently, disillusionment is driving a trend of emigration, as highlighted by a recent survey indicating a significant rise in emigration rates among young Pakistanis.

Moreover, youth enthusiasm for electoral participation appears disconnected from broader socio-economic challenges facing the country. Surveys indicate a surprisingly high level of trust in institutions like the military and the judiciary, suggesting a preference for stability over systemic reform. However, research from global sources suggests a nuanced picture: while populist leaders initially enjoy a surge in youth satisfaction with democracy, this support tends to

wane over time as populist policies either veer towards authoritarianism or fail to deliver on their promises.

In terms of political representation, traditional parties in Pakistan have been slow to embrace youth inclusion. While youth comprise a significant portion of registered voters, their representation within mainstream parties remains disproportionately low. For instance, those below the age of 35 years comprise just 17 percent of the candidates of major political parties Pakistan Tehreek-a-Insaaf (PTI), 13 percent of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and 23 percent of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).<sup>iii</sup>

The stability of Pakistan's patronage-based political system, which often excludes marginalized segments of society, faces challenges from various quarters. Socially excluded individuals perceive political participation as a complex negotiation and coalition-building process. While traditional patronage networks offer stability, they lack inclusivity and agency for marginalized communities. Initiatives such as the national social protection programs (like Ehsaas and BISP) aim to empower socially excluded individuals by bypassing traditional patron-client relationships and asserting their autonomy, but these patronage-based dividends trump the sustainability aspect of such initiatives by keeping the population dependent on them – so the real empowerment does not happen.

Voting trends and political views often adhere to similar patterns, wherein individuals tend to favour those who propose such programs and initiatives. Hence, the beliefs



held by communities or groups typically play a pivotal role in shaping political opinions - this includes young people too, who often align with the prevailing ideologies they've been taught.

However, technology and modernisation have changed the trends and shaken the traditional paradigms as we would later find out in the report.

Pakistan's democracy confronts a dual challenge - a youthful population holding significant electoral power and a sense of disillusionment among young Pakistanis with traditional political structures and practices that nurture dependence, disempowerment of the populace, and a never-ending spiral of uncertain democratic future. Recognizing the diversity within the youth demographic and fostering a culture of inclusion are crucial steps towards a more robust democracy. The future of Pakistan's democracy hinges on its ability to address these issues and provide meaningful avenues for youth participation beyond electoral processes. Ignoring the voices of its youth poses a significant threat to the nation's long-term stability and well-being.

## Study Overview

In Pakistan and globally, the dynamics of youth engagement in politics and their role in shaping democracy have garnered significant attention and debate. Given the nation's youthful demographic and the evolving political environment, the research sought to understand the pivotal role of youth in shaping Pakistan's political and democratic trajectory.

## Methodology

Employing a diverse methodology, this study engaged in interviews with a cohort comprising 25 youth hailing from various regions of Pakistan and 10 subject matter experts. These experts encompassed political scientists, scholars, activists, and politicians. The aim was to glean valuable insights into the nexus of youth, democracy, and politics. Spanning various regions nationwide, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AK), these interviews facilitated a comprehensive examination of the youth's position within Pakistan's political and democratic landscape and formulate policy recommendations with an intersectional lens for the relevant stakeholders.

## Research Questions

Key questions that were explored are depicted as follows:

- How has the youth influenced the political and democratic landscape of Pakistan?
- How have the political and democratic structures empowered/disempowered youth participation and activism?
- Does social class play a role in garnering youth politics and activism? If yes, how? If not, why?
- Where does the youth stand today in Pakistani politics (province-specific views)?
- What can be done to utilize and further build Pakistani youth's potential in politics and democracy?
- What have been some successful strategies of civic engagement in Pakistan that have empowered youth political participation?
- Has youth representation been a priority of Pakistan's politicians and elected leaders? If yes, how? If not, why?
- What lessons can we draw from other South Asian countries when it comes to democracy and politics?

## A Glance at Pakistan's Political and Democratic Journey

Since gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan's political history has been marked by a complex interplay of civilian rule, military interventions, and democratic struggles.<sup>ivv</sup>

### **1947-1958: Early Years and First Military Intervention**

- 1947: Mohammad Ali Jinnah becomes Pakistan's first Governor-General.
- 1951: Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister, is assassinated.
- 1956: Pakistan adopts its first constitution, becoming an Islamic Republic.
- 1958: President Iskander Mirza imposes martial law, initiating Pakistan's first military intervention.

### **1958-1971: Ayub Khan's Presidency and East Pakistan Crisis**

- 1958: General Ayub Khan takes power in a coup, becoming President.
- 1962: A new constitution establishes a presidential system.
- 1965: Ayub Khan wins controversial presidential elections.
- 1969: Ayub Khan resigns amid protests, handing power to General Yahya Khan.

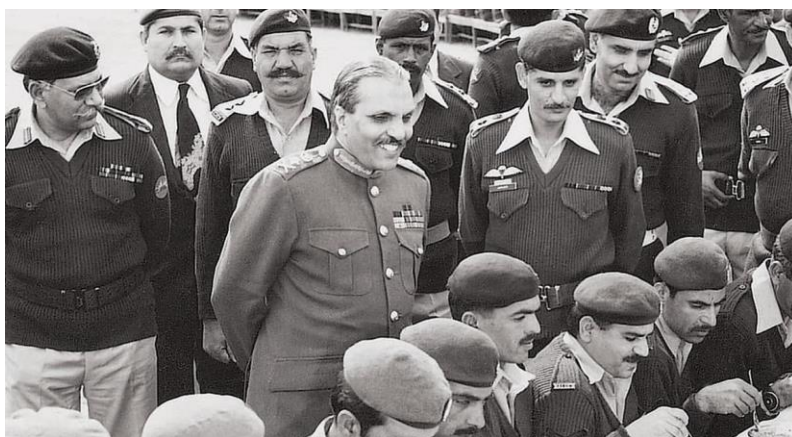
- 1970: General elections result in a victory for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League in East Pakistan.
- 1971: East Pakistan declares independence as Bangladesh, leading to war and the breakup of Pakistan.

### **1971-1977: Bhutto's Leadership and Democratic Transition**

- 1971: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto becomes President of Pakistan.
- 1973: Pakistan adopts a new constitution, transitioning to a parliamentary system.
- 1977: Bhutto's government faces allegations of election rigging, leading to widespread protests.

### **1977-1988: Zia-ul-Haq's Dictatorship**

- 1977: General Zia-ul-Haq stages a coup, imposing martial law and removing Bhutto from power.



*Zia accompanied by officers - Photo from White Star Archives*

- 1979: Bhutto is executed after a controversial trial.
- 1985: Zia holds non-party elections, consolidating power.
- 1988: Zia dies in a plane crash, leading to a transition to civilian rule.

### **1988-1999: Return to Civilian Rule and Sharif-Bhutto Era**

- 1988: Benazir Bhutto becomes Pakistan's first female Prime Minister.
- 1990: President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismisses Bhutto's government.
- 1990: Nawaz Sharif becomes Prime Minister.
- 1993: Bhutto returns to power after Sharif's dismissal.
- 1999: General Pervez Musharraf seizes power in a coup, ousting Sharif's government.

### **1999-2008: Musharraf's Rule and Transition to Democracy**

- 1999: Musharraf becomes Chief Executive, later President.
- 2001: Musharraf assumes the presidency while remaining army chief.
- 2002: Musharraf holds a controversial referendum, extending his presidency.
- 2007: Emergency rule is declared, leading to protests and Bhutto's assassination.



*Benazir Bhutto at the election campaign rally where she was killed.  
– AFP/File*

### **2008-Present: Democracy Restores but with Irregularities**

- 2008: Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) wins elections; Asif Ali Zardari becomes President.
- 2013: Nawaz Sharif returns to power as Prime Minister.
- 2018: Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) wins elections; Khan becomes Prime Minister, promising change and anti-corruption measures.
- 2019: Economic challenges and political controversies plague Khan's government.
- 2021: The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition challenges Khan's rule, calling for his resignation.



*Supporters of Prime Minister Imran Khan rally in Islamabad, Pakistan, on Monday night, April 4, 2022. (Saiyna Bashir/The New York Times)*

- 2022: Imran Khan is ousted through a vote of no confidence, and a PDM-led government takes office, facing challenges of governance and stability.
- 2023: Pakistan's president dissolves the National Assembly or lower house of parliament, a first step in the countdown to the upcoming general election.
- 2024 (Feb): Pakistanis begin voting for a new parliament under tight security.
- 2024 (Feb): PPP and PML-N form coalition government despite massive allegations by the PTI's independents of rigged elections and vote tampering.

Pakistan's political journey from 1947 to 2024 reflects a turbulent blend of democratic transitions and military interventions. Dynastic politics has often dominated, with



families like the Bhuttos and Sharifs wielding significant influence. Military coups, led by figures like Ayub Khan and Pervez Musharraf, have intermittently disrupted democratic processes, fostering instability and curtailing civil liberties. Despite periodic strides towards democratic consolidation, issues like electoral fraud persist, challenging the legitimacy of elected governments.

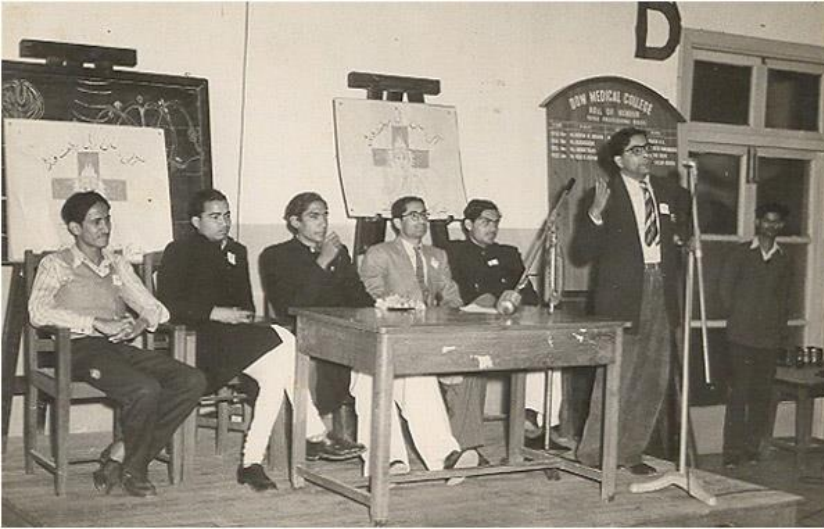
## Student Politics

The timeline of student politics in Pakistan reflects a dynamic interplay of ideologies, power struggles, and societal aspirations as its landscape underwent significant transformations since the country's inception in 1947. Initially, the Muslim Students Federation (MSF) played a pivotal role as the student wing of the ruling Muslim League. However, as the political scene fragmented, so did MSF, leading to the emergence of the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) in 1950.



*Jinnah with members of the women's wing of the Muslim Students Federation*

DSF primarily addressed the academic challenges faced by students, particularly those from migrant backgrounds in Karachi.



*The formation of DSF at Karachi's Dow Medical College*

With the influence of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), DSF evolved into a left-wing organization, advocating for students' rights and challenging the government on various issues. The 1953 Karachi riots, sparked by DSF's demands for educational reforms, marked a turning point in student activism. Despite facing government crackdowns and eventual bans alongside CPP, DSF's legacy persisted.

The rise of the National Students Federation (NSF) further diversified student politics, attracting progressives from various ethnic backgrounds. Meanwhile, the Islamist Islami Jamiat Taleba (IJT) emerged as a conservative force opposing DSF and NSF. The period leading up to Ayub Khan's dictatorship saw intense competition between these student groups, reflecting broader societal tensions.

Ayub Khan's regime, boasting modernist policies, faced opposition from both left-wing and right-wing student organizations. The 1962 Sino-Soviet split further complicated

dynamics within NSF, allowing IJT to gain ground. Bhutto's emergence as a political figure, initially aligned with NSF, eventually led to the formation of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), drawing support from socialist circles.

The late 1960s witnessed a surge in student activism, culminating in Ayub Khan's resignation in 1969.



*1968: NSF activists protesting against Ayub in Karachi*

The subsequent elections marked a shift in power dynamics, with the PPP securing victory in West Pakistan and the Awami League in East Pakistan. However, the refusal to recognize the Awami League's electoral success led to the East Pakistan conflict and the birth of Bangladesh.

The student political landscape continued to evolve, with new organizations like the Pakhtun Students Federation (PkSF) and Baloch Students Organisation (BSO) emerging alongside existing ones. Tensions between NSF and IJT persisted, particularly during the 1970 elections, leading to the formation of militant groups like the Peoples Guards (PG) to counter IJT attacks.

Student involvement in Pakistani politics surged during the 1970s, notably in the anti-Ayub movement and the rise of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPPP) under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Bhutto's government aimed to regulate student politics, which had seen fluctuating levels of freedom throughout the 1960s. By 1972, the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT) emerged as a dominant electoral force, particularly in major universities like Punjab University (PU) and Karachi University (KU), while the National Students Federation (NSF) fragmented.

The IJT's evolution from a democratic-conservative group to one with authoritarian leanings coincided with growing support from rural and migrant populations. Ethnic and religious identities played significant roles, with Urdu-speaking and Punjabi migrant families increasingly aligning with Islamist groups amidst shifting political landscapes.

Despite the formation of the Peoples Students Federation (PSF) by the PPPP, NSF remained a formidable presence, forming alliances with other progressive groups like the Liberal Students Organisation (LSO). The early 1970s saw LSO's victories in student union elections at KU and PU, coinciding with government efforts to regularize these elections nationwide.

The 1977 general elections marked a turning point, with the PPPP losing support from progressive student groups due to perceived deviations from its socialist agenda and crackdowns on dissent. The subsequent military regime under General Zia intensified repression, leading to violent confrontations between student factions.

The 1980s witnessed heightened polarization as Islamist and progressive groups clashed for control over campuses. The Zia regime's 'Islamisation' policies further fueled tensions, culminating in the imposition of a ban on student unions in

1984. Benazir Bhutto's government briefly lifted the ban in 1989, but violence and political turmoil persisted.

By the early 1990s, new evangelical groups like Tableeghi Jamaat (TJ) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir emerged, targeting students with a purportedly apolitical agenda. However, their influence contributed to the rise of a conservative urban middle class. Islamist infiltration into educational institutions continued clandestinely, shaping the political and social landscape for years to come.

In October 2019, Balochistan University witnessed protests over alleged student harassment by the administration, reigniting calls for the reinstatement of student unions. Similar demands have emerged in Punjab and Sindh, with the ruling PPP in Sindh already restoring student unions. Iqbal Haider Butt's book highlights how the bans in 1984 and 1993 negatively impacted political leadership by disconnecting youth from democratic processes.

These bans deprived two generations of Pakistanis of understanding democratic principles, such as electoral participation and advocacy for better academic and extracurricular resources through elected student bodies. Before the decline, student politics in Pakistan served as a vital democratic platform on campuses, empowering students to negotiate improvements.

Globally, the 1960s saw a surge in student activism due to increased enrollment and societal changes post-World War II. However, this momentum waned in the 1970s, transitioning from left-leaning to right-leaning ideologies. The resurgence of youth unrest in Pakistan and elsewhere since 2007 reflects

dissatisfaction with governance and educational systems failing to adapt to evolving socio-political needs.

While calls for reviving student unions are valid, the Cold War-era dynamics that led to their ban in 1984 are outdated. Although Benazir Bhutto's regime repealed the ban in 1989, subsequent attempts at reinstating unions were unsuccessful due to continued violence. The perception of student politics solely as violent overlooks its historical role as a democratic cornerstone that empowered students. Today's politicized youth demand a return to student unions, indicating that attempts to suppress political engagement have failed.<sup>vi</sup>

Although the Senate Committee for Education, in December 2023, approved the bill for the restoration of student organizations in federal educational institutions, the actual implementation and adoption by universities remain uncertain.<sup>vii</sup> While this step is significant for the federal capital, it remains to be seen whether it will be adopted nationwide. Despite concerns about potential violence and division, student unions, if founded on peaceful principles, can play a vital role in fostering grassroots political activism and awareness. Therefore, it is important to observe how universities respond to this bill and whether it becomes a national norm.

## Key Findings (Youth Perspectives)

The following insights and conclusions were drawn from a series of interviews carried out with young individuals during the study:

Significance of Voting and Democracy: The overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) stressed the critical importance of voting as the bedrock of democracy. They universally recognized voting not only as a fundamental right but also as a potent tool through which citizens can actively shape the political landscape and hold their representatives accountable.

Role of Youth in Shaping Political Landscape: Approximately 70% of participants emphasized the pivotal role that youth play in shaping Pakistan's political narrative. They cited examples from various periods in Pakistan's history, including youth-led movements during martial law and the emergence of young parliamentarians such as Nawabzada Mir Jamal Khan Raisani. These instances underscore the agency and influence wielded by young individuals in driving political change and reform.

Structural Barriers to Youth Participation: Despite the significant contributions of youth to Pakistan's political landscape, persistent structural obstacles hinder their full engagement. The ban on student unions, dating back to the 1980s, was identified as a key impediment by approximately 70% of participants. This ban deprived young individuals of crucial platforms for political growth and engagement, stunting the development of a mature political mindset among the youth. Additionally, the dominance of political



elites and the centralization of power were cited as factors that disempower youth from marginalized backgrounds, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion within Pakistan's political institutions.

Socioeconomic Factors and Political Engagement: Around 60% of participants highlighted the influence of social class dynamics on youth political engagement. Economic disparities, the costliness of political campaigns, and the reliance on elite networks were identified as significant barriers that limit the political participation of youth from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, gender roles were identified as another factor shaping youth political engagement, with approximately 45% of participants acknowledging the persistent challenges faced by women and gender minorities in accessing political spaces.

Trends in Youth Political Participation: Noteworthy trends in youth political participation were observed, particularly in regions, Punjab and KP. About 75% of participants highlighted a shifting ethos towards prioritizing individual interests over traditional familial affiliations, reflecting a growing political maturity among young voters. Social media platforms emerged as instrumental tools for political engagement, with nearly 80% of participants acknowledging their role in shaping political discourse and mobilizing youth activism.

Perspectives on Military Interference in Political and Democratic Processes: Views on military interference in political affairs varied among respondents. While some expressed concerns over historical instances of military coups and interventions disrupting democratic processes, others

highlighted perceived benefits, such as stability during times of political turmoil. Approximately 50% of participants voiced skepticism towards military involvement in politics, citing examples from Pakistan's history where military interventions resulted in authoritarian rule and curtailed civil liberties. Conversely, around 30% of respondents viewed the military as a stabilizing force, especially in addressing corruption and inefficiency in civilian governance. However, the majority underscored the importance of upholding civilian supremacy and ensuring that military institutions remain subordinate to elected governments to safeguard democratic principles.

Mistrust in Democratic Institutions: A significant number of individuals interviewed expressed reservations towards democratic institutions, primarily due to concerns regarding their lack of transparency and perceived foreign interference. Roughly 60% of interviewees cited instances where opaque decision-making processes within governmental bodies had eroded public trust, leading to a sense of disillusionment with the democratic system. Additionally, about 40% of those interviewed highlighted the influence of foreign powers, particularly major global players, as a destabilizing factor in Pakistan's democratic governance. They provided examples of foreign aid and geopolitical interests shaping domestic policies, which, in their view, compromised the sovereignty and autonomy of democratic institutions. Despite these challenges, participants stressed the importance of enhancing transparency, accountability, and sovereignty within democratic governance structures to restore public confidence and uphold the integrity of Pakistan's democratic institutions.

## Then and Now – Expert Commentary

Dr. Imdad Chandio, a former DSF chairman and human rights activist, observes that today's youth harbor aspirations that differ from those of the 1970s or 1980s, i.e. this generation is more interconnected, informed, and socially conscious due to unprecedented access to information and communication technologies. Additionally, they exhibit a greater awareness of global issues and are more inclined towards activism and sociopolitical causes.

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*Today's youth are more interconnected, informed, and socially conscious than ever before, yet they remain disengaged from politics.*

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Despite the omnipresence of politics, Chandio laments the apparent disengagement of contemporary youth, who perceive politics primarily as a means to serve political agendas rather than as a vehicle for representing their genuine interests. He further highlights the failure of successive regimes, both dictatorships and democratic governments, to ensure and uphold the democratic rights of youth and students.

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*Student unions are the bedrock of youth engagement in politics and civic education.*

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On the other hand, Zafarullah Khan, a parliamentary expert and political scientist, underscores the critical role of student unions as a cornerstone for youth engagement in politics and

civic education. He laments the decline in youth interest in politics since the ban on student unions and emphasizes the need for civic education as a vaccine for effective democratic participation. Khan critiques the political and democratic structures in South Asia, highlighting the dominance of money in politics and the limited opportunities for youth participation, particularly in local government. Despite the existence of youth wings in political parties, Khan notes the absence of substantive roles for youth in policy articulation and decision-making. He observes that while Pakistani youth constitute a significant portion of voters, they often feel disempowered in the political process and express frustration with traditional politics. Khan advocates for greater youth participation through informed civic education, including teaching the constitution and rules of the political game and promoting coexistence with political opponents in a pluralistic polity.

Dr. Anoosh Khan, a gender studies scholar from KP, sheds light on the significant influence of youth on Pakistan's political landscape, particularly noting their active participation in recent elections and various activities despite the official ban on student unions. She highlights the paradoxical role of certain democratic structures, such as media and social media, which both empower and disempower youth by controlling narratives and limiting their avenues for activism.

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*Reinstate student unions to empower youth and ensure gender-inclusive political representation.*

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Dr. Khan advocates for the reinstatement of student unions in universities to provide youth with a focused direction for their activism and ensure their participation in decision-making processes. She acknowledges the pervasive influence of social class in Pakistani society, noting how it affects not only politics but all aspects of life, often giving those from higher social classes an advantage. Regarding gender roles, Dr. Khan observes a lack of women's participation in youth politics, with few women holding decision-making positions in political unions at universities. She identifies unique trends in youth participation in KP, including aggressive behaviour by youth representatives of certain parties and lower participation of women in politics – an impediment to apt political representation of the gender.

Ahmed Iqbal, a young politician from Punjab, highlights the significant impact of youth on the political and democratic landscape of Pakistan. He observes a notable shift away from traditional patronage networks and voting blocs, such as Bradri and family groups, towards independent decision-making among the youth. While acknowledging that young people still have ties to these groups, Iqbal notes an increase in political involvement, evidenced by a surge in new voter registrations between 2018 and 2024. This trend has gradually eroded the influence of traditional voting blocs with each election cycle.

In terms of empowerment and disempowerment, Iqbal recognizes the entrenched nature of political parties like PML (N) and PPP in the traditional electoral system. These parties, adept at exploiting patronage-based networks and baradari politics, have struggled to adapt to new paradigms that

prioritize youth participation. In contrast, newer parties like PTI have demonstrated greater alignment with contemporary realities, creating structures and forums that offer more space for young people. PTI's efforts have effectively empowered youth participation and activism, surpassing the slower pace of change seen in other parties.

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*The urban elite prioritizes vanity; the middle class focuses on real-life issues.*

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Regarding social class, Iqbal emphasizes its significant influence on youth politics and activism in Pakistan. While urban and rural youth, as well as low-income individuals, do participate in politics, their representation often reflects the issues pertinent to their social class. The urban elite may prioritize abstract concerns driven by vanity, while the middle class is more focused on tangible, real-life issues. However, widespread disenchantment with the government's failure to address quality-of-life issues has fueled frustration and protest voting among many individuals across social classes.

To harness and further build the potential of Pakistani youth in politics and democracy, Iqbal advocates for grassroots organizing at the college, village, and community levels. He emphasizes the need for youth groups to establish a presence outside of political parties, as existing parties may not provide adequate space for their participation. By organizing independently, young people can amplify their impact and advocate for their interests more effectively.

Faiza Mir, a scholar and education activist from Balochistan, highlights the transformative role of education as a stepping stone towards political agency for Baloch youth. Mir underscores the significant progress in education witnessed in Balochistan, with initiatives such as increased access to transportation for female students and a rising number of students pursuing higher education at the University of Balochistan.

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*Education is the catalyst for Baloch youth's political empowerment.*

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Mir emphasizes that education has equipped Baloch youth with the knowledge and skills to engage meaningfully in political discourse and activism. As students from diverse backgrounds converge, they bring with them their concerns and aspirations, reshaping political dialogue and demanding accountability from politicians.

By investing in education and providing opportunities for intellectual growth and critical thinking, Balochistan can further amplify the political agency of its youth, fostering a new generation of leaders and change-makers committed to advancing democracy and social justice in the region, suggests the scholar.

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*Social media has become the megaphone for Pakistani youth demanding accountability and change.*

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Sindhoo Nawaz, a young politician from Kandiaro, Sindh, stresses the transformative role of social media in empowering young people to demand transparency and accountability from the government. Despite the lack of prominent young leaders, Nawaz notes a significant increase in youth voter turnout during recent elections, fueled by a desire for tangible change. However, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for youth to voice their concerns and advocate for meaningful reforms.

Dr. Aamer Raza, an academic and political analyst, emphasizes the burgeoning youth population, noting their increasing education levels and urbanization compared to previous generations. Despite their substantial impact, Raza highlights the systemic barriers hindering their full participation in traditional political structures.

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*Pakistan's educated youth face barriers to full political participation despite having potential.*

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When examining the empowerment or disempowerment of youth in politics, Raza identifies two major obstacles: the opaque functioning of political parties and the perception of traditional political processes as exclusive and financially burdensome. He underscores the need for greater transparency and accessibility within political organizations to encourage youth engagement.

Discussing the role of social class in Pakistani politics, Raza underscores its pervasive influence, particularly in perpetuating inherited power structures and limiting political participation to the financially privileged. He also



acknowledges the impact of clan affiliations, such as the baradari system, on voting patterns in various regions.

A Baloch political activist underscores a notable contrast in political and democratic consciousness and entitlements between Balochistan and other regions of Pakistan.

According to her, Balochistan significantly trails behind owing to its consistently deficient political and governance terrain, compounded by the prevalent dominance of the military establishment. This prevailing influence, she deems, constitutes the fundamental factor behind the province's political and democratic decline, resulting in the disempowerment and marginalization of Baloch youth.

Throughout the expert interviews, a prevailing sentiment emerged: Pakistan's political arena is largely controlled by a select group of 30-40 political and feudal elites, painting a picture more akin to an oligarchy than a true democracy. Disenfranchisement persists among various groups, particularly the youth, who continue to feel marginalized by traditional political structures. The failure of mainstream politics to deliver meaningful change has further disempowered Pakistani youth, a fact underscored by the high average age of parliamentarians in the 2018 parliament, which stood at around 53 years.

Despite this, there's a perceived uptick in youth engagement in political discourse and processes. However, some experts caution that this increase may not stem from independent analysis but rather reflects borrowed viewpoints. While Pakistani youth have become more vocal politically, many still harbour aspirations to leave the country due to a growing lack of opportunities at home. This stark reality underscores

the disconnect between the outward expression of political opinions and the underlying desire for personal empowerment and better prospects. In essence, while Pakistani youth may have taken a more prominent role in political discussions, the broader sociopolitical and economic landscape often compels them to seek opportunities abroad – leaving the country in turmoil as is.

## Policy Recommendations

1. **Reinstate Student Unions:** Reintroducing student unions in educational institutions is crucial for nurturing political awareness and activism among youth. By providing platforms for debate, advocacy, and leadership development, student unions can empower young people to engage meaningfully in civic affairs and contribute to democratic processes.
2. **Civic Education Curriculum:** Implement a comprehensive civic education curriculum in schools and universities to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for active citizenship. This curriculum should cover topics such as democracy, human rights, civic responsibility, and political participation, fostering a culture of informed engagement from an early age.
3. **Youth Representation in Political Parties:** Political parties should prioritize youth representation in their structures and decision-making processes. Establishing youth wings with substantive roles and ensuring meaningful participation of young people in policy formulation and implementation can cultivate a more inclusive and responsive political environment.
4. **Address Structural Barriers:** Address structural barriers that hinder youth participation in politics, such as the ban on student unions and the dominance of political elites. Reforms aimed at decentralizing power, promoting transparency, and reducing the

influence of patronage networks can create a more level playing field for youth from diverse backgrounds to enter and engage in politics.

5. **Promote Gender-Inclusive Participation:** Take proactive measures to promote gender-inclusive participation in youth politics and activism. Encourage the involvement of women and gender minorities in decision-making positions within student unions, political parties, and other civic organizations. Providing mentorship, training, and support networks can help overcome barriers to women's political engagement.
6. **Harness Social Media for Civic Engagement:** Leverage social media platforms to amplify youth voices, facilitate public discourse, and mobilize grassroots activism. Government agencies, civil society organizations, and political parties should utilize social media as a tool for transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, especially among the youth.
7. **Invest in Education and Economic Opportunities:** Invest in quality education and economic opportunities to address the underlying factors driving youth disenchantment and emigration. Creating pathways for skill development, entrepreneurship, and employment can empower young people to contribute meaningfully to their communities and participate actively in shaping their future.

8. **Civil Society Engagement and Advocacy:** Strengthen partnerships between government institutions, civil society organizations, and youth-led initiatives to promote civic engagement and advocacy. Support youth-led campaigns, community projects, and grassroots initiatives that address pressing social, economic, and political issues, fostering a culture of civic responsibility and collective action.
9. **Ensure Civilian Supremacy:** Safeguard civilian supremacy and uphold the principles of democracy by preventing undue military interference in political affairs. Strengthen democratic institutions, promote the rule of law, and ensure accountability mechanisms to prevent authoritarianism and protect democratic freedoms.
10. **Learn from International Best Practices:** Study and learn from international best practices in youth engagement, democratic governance, and political participation. Exchange knowledge, experiences, and lessons learned with other South Asian countries and global partners to inform policy development and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing youth inclusion and democratic resilience.

## Epilogue

As Pakistan traverses its democratic path, it finds itself at a pivotal moment, balancing the hopes of its burgeoning youth population with the entrenched challenges of historical disillusionment and exclusion. This juncture isn't just a crossroads but a moment of reckoning, demanding a confrontation with its past, a negotiation of its present, and a shaping of its future trajectory. As we reflect on the complexities of Pakistan's democratic journey, it becomes clear that the road to a vibrant and inclusive democracy isn't just about policy reforms and institutional changes; it also requires a profound shift in societal attitudes and collective actions.

At the core of Pakistan's democratic narrative lies its youthful population, comprising a significant majority of its demographic landscape. With approximately 64% of the population aged between 15 and 29, the nation stands at a critical intersection where the aspirations, energy, and demands of its youth intersect with the imperatives of democratic governance. Yet, despite their numerical strength, young Pakistanis grapple with a sense of disillusionment and disengagement from traditional political structures. Recent general elections have highlighted this disconnect, with voter turnout among young Pakistanis trailing behind the national average, signaling a growing alienation from the electoral process.

A deeper analysis reveals that this disillusionment stems from various factors, including the failure of mainstream political parties to address pressing youth concerns such as

unemployment, education, and inflation. Manifestos often overlook these vital issues, leaving young voters feeling marginalized and unheard. Furthermore, the allure of emigration as a means of escaping socio-economic challenges underscores a deeper malaise within Pakistani society, where the promise of a better future lies beyond its borders. In this context, the preference for stability over systemic reform, as evidenced by the high level of trust in institutions like the military and judiciary, raises questions about the resilience of Pakistan's democratic foundations.

However, beneath the surface of disillusionment lies a complex landscape characterized by a dynamic interplay of socioeconomic dynamics, political structures, and cultural paradigms. While populist leaders may initially enjoy a surge in youth satisfaction with democracy, the sustainability of this support hinges upon their ability to deliver on promises and uphold democratic values. Moreover, the slow pace of youth inclusion within mainstream political parties underscores the entrenched nature of patronage-based politics, which often excludes marginalized segments of society. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement, where youth from underprivileged backgrounds struggle to find representation and agency within the political sphere.

Against this backdrop of challenges and complexities, the imperative for change becomes increasingly urgent. The stability of Pakistan's democratic future rests on its ability to embrace a culture of inclusivity and empower its youth as active agents of change. This requires not just top-down reforms but also bottom-up initiatives that foster grassroots engagement and civic participation. Efforts to enhance

transparency, accountability, and representation within political institutions are crucial steps toward building a more resilient democracy that reflects the aspirations and values of all its citizens.

Yet, the journey toward democratic consolidation is fraught with obstacles and uncertainties, requiring steadfast resolve and collective action. It demands a reimagining of Pakistan's democratic ethos, grounded in principles of equity, justice, and pluralism. It calls for a redefinition of citizenship that transcends narrow identities and embraces the diversity of Pakistan's cultural tapestry. It challenges the status quo and emboldens citizens to reclaim their agency and voice in shaping the nation's destiny.

As we reflect on Pakistan's democratic journey, we are reminded that the struggle for democracy is not a linear path but a continuous process of evolution and adaptation. It is a journey marked by triumphs and setbacks, progress and regressions, but above all, it is a journey fueled by the collective aspirations of a nation determined to realize its full potential. In this journey, the youth emerge as torchbearers of change, catalysts of progress, and guardians of democracy. Their voices echo not just in the corridors of power but in the streets, schools, and communities where the seeds of change are sown.

In conclusion, the future of Pakistan's democracy rests not in the hands of a few but in the collective will of its citizens to forge a path towards a more just, equitable, and inclusive society. It is a future shaped by the ideals of democracy, where every voice is heard, every vote counts, and every citizen is empowered to participate fully in the democratic



process. As we embark on this journey together, let us heed the lessons of the past, embrace the challenges of the present, and chart a course towards a future where democracy thrives, and the aspirations of all Pakistanis are realized.

## Expert Profiles

**Dr. Imdad Hussain Chandio** serves as an advisor at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and has a rich history of political activism.

In the mid-70s, he joined student activism against the Yahya Khan regime, associated with the Sindh National Students Federation. He was imprisoned for one month in Nawabshah and Khairpur jails for participating in a local protest. In 1981, during the Zia regime, he was arrested and sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment and 10 lashes alongside other comrades. While in prison, he was elected the founding Chairman of the DSF in 1982. Amnesty International titled him a *prisoner of conscience*. He was released in 1986 after completing his sentence according to the jail manual.

**Dr. Anoosh Khan** is a faculty member at the University of Peshawar, holding a doctorate from American University, Washington, DC. Specializing in Race, Gender, and Social Justice, Dr. Khan's academic endeavours delve into discourse analysis, ideology, and citizenship, with a particular focus on gender intersectionality.

**Dr. Aamer Raza** holds a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts Boston as a Fulbright Scholar, and a Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) with a focus on International Relations

and Affairs from Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. Currently, Dr. Raza teaches at the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar.

**Ahmed Iqbal** is a politician and has served as district council chairman of Narowal, Punjab. Iqbal holds a masters in public policy from the University of Pennsylvania, USA. He is also a founder of *Dehleez*, a non-profit that works on empowering local governments across Pakistan.

**Zafarullah Khan** is a Pakistan-based civic educator and was the executive director of the Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services (PIPS), a research and advocacy think tank that endeavors to promote democratic values and parliamentary processes in Pakistan. Khan was the executive director of the Centre for Civic Education until 2016, an independent educational institution that works to cultivate civic culture. Khan has also worked with leading newspapers and occasionally contributes to issues related to democratic development in Pakistan.

In 2016, he received the National Human Rights Award for civil and political rights. In the same year, the Pakistan Senate published Khan's book, "Consistent Parliamentary Cord: Fundamental Rights of Citizens," recounting the development and codification of fundamental rights in the Constitution.

**Sindhoo Nawaz Ghangro** is an alumna of the International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) and an emerging politician from Sindh known for advocacy on human rights in Sindh. She remains vocal on core issues such as enforced

disappearances, laborers' exploitation at the hands of feudal landlords, and dynastic politics in Sindh province.

**Dr. Faiza Mir** is an education activist and teaches international relations at the University of Balochistan.

**Ghayas Ud Din Sahil** is a writer, poet, and affiliated with the Awami National Party (ANP) in Balochistan province.

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# The Center

## CRSS Background

The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) is a think tank/advocacy center launched in September, 2007. Founded by noted security expert and media personality Imtiaz Gul, it is committed to the cause of independent research, nonpartisan analysis, and informed advocacy.

As an advocacy center, CRSS is dedicated to trigger critical thinking through discourse anchored in global democratic values such as socio-political diversity, rule of law, equal citizenry, and acceptance of diversity, fundamental human rights, all at the intersection of empirical research in security studies.

## Core Values

CRSS strives to embed the national conversation in constitutionalism, and rationalize it over extremism and sectarianism. CRSS believes the path to peace is through embodying fundamental human rights, specifically:

- strict adherence to the rule of law, and stringent implementation
- informing the public on civic education, especially good governance and public accountability
- promoting equal rights for all citizens of Pakistan
- championing women empowerment
- providing training and opportunities to youth to veer them away from radicalization through critical thinking

CRSS' programming reflects its core values, which CRSS believes can, along with time-tested methodologies in strategic communications, impactful message development, research and advocacy result in a more tolerant and cohesive Pakistan.

## Center For Research & Security Studies

14-M, Ali Plaza, Second Floor, F-8 Markaz, Islamabad

Tel: +92-51-831-4801-03 | Fax: +92-51-831-4804

E-mail: [info@crss.pk](mailto:info@crss.pk), web: [www.crss.pk](http://www.crss.pk)