

Democratic Backsliding and Institutional Resilience in Pakistan: A Contemporary Political Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Democracy in Pakistan has always developed within a difficult political environment shaped by civil-military tensions, institutional competition, political polarization, weak governance, and repeated constitutional disruptions. Although the country has maintained electoral institutions and experienced periods of civilian rule, democratic consolidation remains incomplete. In recent years, concerns about democratic backsliding have become more visible as political competition has increasingly been accompanied by restrictions on political participation, pressure on media, controversies surrounding elections, institutional confrontation, and a growing imbalance among state institutions. The 2024 general elections further demonstrated the complexity of Pakistan's democratic order: electoral competition remained significant, yet questions concerning political freedoms, the electoral process, representation, and the relationship between elected institutions and unelected centers of power continued to shape political debate. This article examines democratic backsliding and institutional resilience in contemporary Pakistan through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, constitutional developments, democracy indices, institutional reports, and contemporary political analysis. The study argues that Pakistan should not simply be described as moving from democracy toward authoritarianism. Rather, it represents a more complicated form of democratic erosion in which formal democratic institutions continue to exist while their autonomy, accountability, and effectiveness are repeatedly challenged. The article focuses on five major areas: civil-military relations, electoral institutions, the judiciary, parliament and political parties, and media and civil society. It further argues that Pakistan's democratic institutions possess considerable resilience, particularly through constitutional continuity, electoral participation, judicial contestation, political mobilization, civil society activism, and public demand for representative government. However, institutional resilience alone cannot guarantee democratic consolidation. Long-term democratic stability requires stronger civilian supremacy, credible elections, judicial independence, parliamentary effectiveness, media freedom, political tolerance, and a political culture based on constitutional rules rather than short-term institutional advantage.

Keywords: *Democratic Backsliding, Institutional Resilience, Pakistan, Democracy, Civil-Military Relations, Political Institutions, Elections, Judiciary, Political Parties, Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is often understood simply as the presence of elections, political parties, parliaments, and constitutional institutions. In practice, however, democracy is much broader. It depends on whether citizens

can meaningfully participate in politics, whether elections are credible, whether political opponents can compete without intimidation, whether institutions can operate independently, and whether governments can be held accountable under the law. A country may therefore continue to hold elections while simultaneously experiencing democratic decline. This distinction is particularly important in the case of Pakistan. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has experienced repeated interruptions in democratic government, military interventions, constitutional crises, judicial controversies, political polarization, and struggles over the distribution of political authority. At the same time, democratic institutions have repeatedly survived these crises. Political parties have continued to organize, voters have participated in elections, parliaments have returned after periods of military rule, courts have challenged executive decisions, and civil society has remained active. Pakistan's political history is therefore not simply a story of democratic failure. It is also a story of institutional survival.

The contemporary period makes this tension particularly visible. Pakistan has maintained a competitive multiparty electoral system, but major international assessments continue to identify serious weaknesses in political rights, civil liberties, electoral credibility, media freedom, and the balance of power among institutions. Freedom House's 2026 assessment continues to classify Pakistan as "Partly Free" and notes the substantial influence of the military over elections, government formation, and policy, alongside restrictions on civil liberties and pressure on media. International IDEA similarly reports significant declines in Pakistan's indicators of credible elections and elected government over the previous five years. The 2024 general elections represented an important moment in this debate. The elections demonstrated continuing public engagement with electoral politics and the ability of political forces to mobilize voters, but the political environment surrounding the elections also generated substantial controversy concerning political competition, party participation, media space, and the relationship between civilian political actors and powerful state institutions. Rather than treating the election as either a complete democratic success or an absolute failure, it is more useful to understand it as evidence of the contradictory nature of Pakistan's political system.

The concept of **democratic backsliding** provides a useful framework for understanding this contradiction. Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, norms, rights, and accountability mechanisms. Unlike traditional coups, contemporary democratic erosion often takes place through legal, constitutional, administrative, or institutional mechanisms. Democratic institutions may remain formally intact while their practical autonomy is gradually reduced (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). At the same time, the concept of **institutional resilience** offers the other side of the picture. Resilience refers to the capacity of political institutions and society to absorb political pressures, adapt to crises, preserve constitutional structures, and continue performing democratic functions. Pakistan's experience demonstrates that institutional weakness and institutional resilience can exist simultaneously. This article therefore asks a central question: **How has democratic backsliding affected Pakistan's political institutions, and why have these institutions nevertheless continued to demonstrate resilience?** The article argues that democratic backsliding in Pakistan is best understood as a process of **institutional erosion rather than complete democratic collapse**. The central problem is not the disappearance of democratic institutions but the repeated weakening of their autonomy and effectiveness. Nevertheless, constitutional continuity, electoral participation, political mobilization, civil society, judicial contestation, and public expectations of representative government provide important sources of democratic resilience.

Conceptualizing Democratic Backsliding

The concept of democratic backsliding has become increasingly important in comparative politics. Earlier studies of authoritarianism often focused on dramatic events such as military coups, revolutions, or the abolition of elections. Contemporary democratic decline is frequently more gradual. Bermeo (2016) describes modern democratic backsliding as the state-led weakening or elimination of political institutions that sustain democracy. This process may occur through executive aggrandizement, strategic manipulation of elections, restrictions on civil liberties, or the weakening of institutions responsible for accountability. In this sense, democratic erosion does not necessarily require the formal abolition of democracy. Waldner and Lust (2018) similarly emphasize that democratic backsliding involves deterioration in the quality of democratic institutions and political competition. The process may be gradual and difficult to identify because individual institutional changes can appear legally legitimate when considered separately. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) further demonstrate that democracy depends not only on formal constitutional rules but also on informal norms. Two norms are particularly important: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Mutual toleration requires political actors to recognize their opponents as legitimate participants in political life. Institutional forbearance means exercising restraint even when legal authority permits more aggressive action.

These concepts are highly relevant to Pakistan. Political competition has increasingly become personalized and confrontational. Governments and opposition parties frequently view each other not simply as political competitors but as existential threats. Institutional powers may consequently be used to weaken political rivals rather than strengthen democratic governance.

Democratic backsliding in Pakistan can therefore be examined through several indicators:

- weakening of electoral credibility;
- restrictions on political participation;
- pressure on media and freedom of expression;
- excessive institutional intervention in political affairs;
- erosion of parliamentary effectiveness;
- judicial politicization or institutional confrontation;
- weakening of civilian control over security institutions; and
- growing political polarization.

However, these indicators should not automatically lead to the conclusion that democracy has disappeared. The continued existence of elections, political parties, courts, parliament, media organizations, civil society organizations, and public political participation demonstrates that Pakistan retains important democratic structures.

Pakistan's Historical Democratic Trajectory

Pakistan's democratic difficulties cannot be understood without considering its historical institutional development. The early years of the state were characterized by political instability, constitutional uncertainty, bureaucratic dominance, and increasing influence of the military. Pakistan experienced periods of direct military rule under Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf. These periods profoundly influenced the country's political institutions and established patterns in which military leadership could become an alternative source of political authority. Political parties and civilian institutions consequently struggled to develop uninterrupted democratic traditions.

The problem was not simply the existence of military interventions. Repeated interventions also affected institutional incentives. Civilian political actors sometimes sought support from non-elected institutions to defeat political opponents, while powerful state institutions developed expectations of involvement in political decision-making. The result was a political system in which the boundaries between civilian and security institutions remained contested. Research on Pakistan's civil-military relations has repeatedly identified this imbalance as one of the central obstacles to democratic consolidation. Recent scholarship examining the period from 2010 to 2024 continues to identify military influence over formal institutions, political processes, resource distribution, and security policymaking as an important dimension of Pakistan's political system.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's democratic history also contains important examples of resilience. The lawyers' movement, political mobilization against military rule, the restoration of parliamentary government in 2008, repeated electoral transitions, and the continued survival of major political parties demonstrate that civilian political institutions have not disappeared. The most important historical development was perhaps the gradual normalization of electoral transition. Since 2008, Pakistan has experienced repeated transfers of government through parliamentary processes, even though these transitions have frequently been accompanied by institutional conflict. This represents an important difference from earlier periods of political instability. Thus, Pakistan's democratic history contains two simultaneous trends: **institutional fragility and institutional survival**.

Civil-military relations and Democratic backsliding

Civil-military relations remain central to any analysis of democratic politics in Pakistan. In a constitutional democracy, the armed forces are expected to remain subordinate to elected civilian authorities. In Pakistan, however, historical security challenges, regional conflicts, weak civilian institutions, and political instability have contributed to a broader political role for the military. The military's influence does not necessarily have to take the form of direct rule. Contemporary political systems can experience military influence through informal channels, institutional networks, security policy, political mediation, and influence over strategic decision-making. This distinction is important because democratic backsliding today may occur without the dissolution of parliament or suspension of the constitution. A formally elected government may continue to operate while important decisions remain influenced by institutions that are not directly accountable to voters. Freedom House's assessment of Pakistan emphasizes this problem by noting that the military continues to exert substantial influence over elections, government formation, and policymaking.

The problem is therefore not simply whether the military is "political" or "non-political." The deeper issue is whether democratic institutions possess sufficient authority to make political decisions independently and whether elected officials are able to exercise constitutional responsibilities without informal constraints. Civil-military imbalance also affects political parties. When political actors believe that their

political survival depends on relationships with powerful non-elected institutions, they have less incentive to strengthen parliament and internal party democracy. Politics becomes increasingly focused on gaining access to state power rather than building stable democratic institutions. At the same time, the military's influence cannot be separated from weaknesses within civilian politics. Political parties have often struggled with internal democracy, policy continuity, institutional development, and tolerance of opposition. This creates a vicious cycle:

Weak Political Institutions → Institutional Intervention → Reduced Civilian Capacity → Continued Political Dependence

Breaking this cycle requires strengthening civilian institutions rather than simply criticizing military involvement.

Elections and Political Representation

Elections are at the heart of democratic legitimacy. However, elections alone do not guarantee democracy. The quality of democracy also depends on whether political parties can compete freely, whether voters have meaningful choices, whether electoral administration is trusted, and whether elected representatives can exercise authority after the election. Pakistan's electoral history reflects this tension. The country has maintained a multiparty electoral system, and political parties continue to attract substantial public support. Yet questions concerning electoral fairness, political restrictions, constituency-level competition, campaign conditions, and post-election political legitimacy have repeatedly affected public confidence.

The 2024 general elections became particularly important in this regard. They demonstrated significant voter engagement and political competition, but the surrounding political environment generated continuing controversy over the treatment of political actors, electoral processes, media access, and the distribution of political power. International IDEA reports that Pakistan has experienced significant negative changes in the areas of credible elections and elected government over the preceding five years.

This situation illustrates an important characteristic of democratic backsliding: elections may continue while the conditions surrounding them become less democratic. Electoral institutions therefore face a difficult challenge. The Election Commission and other relevant institutions must not only organize elections but also maintain public confidence in the electoral process. Transparency, consistent application of electoral rules, timely publication of results, effective dispute resolution, and equal political opportunity are essential. The legitimacy of an election ultimately depends on more than the announcement of results. It depends on whether citizens and political competitors believe that the rules were applied fairly.

Parliament and Political Parties

Parliament is one of the most important institutions of democratic resilience. It provides representation, legislation, oversight, and a constitutional mechanism for peaceful political conflict. Pakistan's parliament, however, has frequently struggled to develop the institutional strength required for sustained democratic governance. Parliamentary proceedings can become dominated by confrontation between government and opposition. Legislation may sometimes be passed without sufficient deliberation, while parliamentary oversight over executive institutions remains uneven.

Political parties face similar challenges. Major parties possess deep organizational roots and substantial public support, but internal decision-making often remains highly centralized around individual leaders and

political families. This personalization of politics creates two problems. First, political parties become vulnerable to leadership crises. When political competition becomes centered around individual personalities, institutional continuity becomes weaker.

Second, political parties may find it difficult to accept political defeat. If political survival depends heavily on the success of one leader or faction, losing an election can appear to threaten the entire political organization. Strong democracies require parties that are capable of both winning and losing elections peacefully. Pakistan therefore needs to move from **leader-centered politics toward institution-centered political parties**. Internal party elections, transparent candidate selection, policy-based political competition, stronger parliamentary committees, and greater participation of women and young people could strengthen political parties as democratic institutions.

Judiciary and Constitutional Politics

The judiciary occupies a particularly complicated position in Pakistan's democratic development. Courts have historically played important roles in constitutional interpretation, protection of rights, and institutional accountability. At the same time, judicial intervention in political matters has generated significant debate. The judicialization of politics occurs when political conflicts increasingly move from parliament and political institutions into courts. Pakistan has experienced repeated episodes in which courts have become central actors in political disputes. This has sometimes strengthened accountability, but it can also blur the boundaries between judicial and political authority. Siddique's analysis of judicialization in Pakistan highlights the country's long constitutional history and the expanding role of courts in political questions.

Judicial independence is essential for democracy, but independence also requires institutional legitimacy. Courts must be able to decide politically sensitive cases without becoming perceived as instruments of either the government or the opposition. Recent debates about judicial reforms and institutional restructuring have therefore become part of the broader democratic debate in Pakistan. Contemporary analysis has raised concerns about the possibility of weakening judicial autonomy and about the changing relationship between the judiciary, executive, parliament, and security establishment. The appropriate democratic objective is not to make courts politically powerful or politically weak. It is to ensure that they remain **constitutionally independent, professionally credible, and institutionally accountable**.

Media, Freedom of expression and the digital political sphere

A democratic system cannot function effectively without freedom of expression. Media organizations provide citizens with information, expose government failures, give political actors a platform, and create opportunities for public debate. Pakistan has a large and politically active media sector, but journalists and media organizations have faced considerable pressures. These pressures may include legal restrictions, political pressure, censorship, economic vulnerability, and restrictions on digital communication. Reporters Without Borders' 2026 country profile places Pakistan at **153rd out of 180 countries** in its World Press Freedom Index, illustrating the continuing challenges faced by journalists and media institutions.

The expansion of social media has changed this environment. Digital platforms have created new opportunities for political mobilization, particularly for groups that feel excluded from traditional media. Citizens can now communicate directly with political leaders, organize campaigns, and challenge official narratives. However, digital politics also has negative consequences. Disinformation, online harassment,

political polarization, coordinated propaganda, and restrictions on internet access can weaken meaningful democratic discussion.

The digital sphere has therefore become both a source of **democratic resilience and democratic vulnerability**. On one side, citizens have greater opportunities to express political opinions. On the other, political actors can use digital spaces to intensify polarization and discredit opponents. The challenge for Pakistan is to regulate harmful content without using regulation as a tool for suppressing legitimate political expression.

Political Polarization and Democratic Erosion

Political polarization has become one of the most serious challenges to democratic stability in Pakistan. Political disagreement is normal in a democracy. The problem begins when political opponents are treated as enemies rather than legitimate competitors. When political polarization becomes extreme, institutions can become instruments of partisan conflict. Pakistan's recent political environment demonstrates this problem clearly. Relations between government and opposition have often become highly confrontational. Political disputes frequently extend into parliament, courts, media organizations, social media, and administrative institutions. Polarization creates a cycle of institutional distrust:

Political Polarization → Institutional Distrust → Aggressive Institutional Use → Reduced Political Tolerance → Greater Polarization

This cycle weakens democratic norms even when formal institutions remain intact. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that democratic systems depend heavily on informal norms of restraint and mutual recognition. Pakistan's democratic consolidation therefore requires political actors to recognize that winning political competition does not mean permanently controlling state institutions. A government should not treat the opposition as illegitimate simply because it lost an election. Likewise, opposition parties should not treat every government decision as automatically illegitimate. Democracy requires competition, but it also requires acceptance of rules.

Institutional Resilience in Pakistan

Despite these challenges, describing Pakistan only through the lens of democratic decline would provide an incomplete picture. Pakistan has demonstrated considerable institutional resilience.

- First, **constitutional continuity** remains an important source of resilience. The 1973 Constitution has survived military interventions, political crises, judicial disputes, and institutional conflicts. Although repeatedly amended and contested, its continued centrality demonstrates the importance of constitutionalism in Pakistani politics.
- Second, **electoral institutions have survived**. Elections continue to provide an important mechanism through which citizens express political preferences. Political parties continue to organize around electoral competition.
- Third, **political parties have demonstrated remarkable survival capacity**. Pakistan's major parties have experienced periods of government and opposition, leadership crises, repression, fragmentation, and electoral defeat, yet political party organizations have repeatedly returned to electoral competition.

- Fourth, **civil society remains politically significant**. Lawyers, journalists, academics, students, professional organizations, NGOs, and rights groups have repeatedly participated in debates over constitutionalism, accountability, civil liberties, and democratic rights.
- Fifth, **public political awareness has expanded**. The growth of television, digital media, and social networking has produced a more politically conscious population. Citizens increasingly debate constitutional rights, electoral legitimacy, institutional accountability, and governance.

These forms of resilience demonstrate that democratic institutions cannot be understood only through formal structures. Society itself can act as a source of democratic resistance.

Institutional Resilience versus Institutional Weakness

The Pakistani case suggests that resilience and weakness can exist simultaneously. An institution may survive but remain weak. Parliament is a good example. Its continued existence represents institutional resilience, but limited oversight capacity can indicate institutional weakness. Similarly, elections demonstrate democratic resilience, but questions surrounding electoral credibility indicate institutional vulnerability. The judiciary has survived periods of political pressure and has sometimes challenged powerful governments, but political controversies surrounding judicial decisions raise questions about institutional neutrality. Civil society remains active, but restrictions on political expression can reduce its ability to influence public policy. This suggests that the central question should not simply be: "**Does the institution exist?**" Instead, scholars should ask: "**How much autonomy, legitimacy, capacity, and public trust does the institution possess?**" Institutional resilience should therefore be measured through at least four dimensions:

Dimension	Key Question
Autonomy	Can institutions make decisions without inappropriate external pressure?
Capacity	Can institutions perform their constitutional responsibilities effectively?
Legitimacy	Do citizens and political actors trust institutional decisions?
Adaptability	Can institutions respond to political crises without abandoning democratic principles?

Pakistan's institutions show varying levels of resilience across these dimensions.

Democratic Backsliding and The State

Another important aspect of Pakistan's democratic crisis concerns the relationship between democracy and state capacity. It is tempting to assume that stronger democracy automatically produces better governance. The relationship, however, is more complicated. Weak administrative institutions can undermine democracy because citizens may lose confidence in elected governments when public services fail. Similarly, political instability can make state institutions more dependent on powerful bureaucratic or security organizations.

Recent scholarship on democratic backsliding and public administration highlights the importance of examining how changes in political regimes affect administrative institutions rather than treating democracy and bureaucracy as completely separate areas of study. Pakistan therefore needs democratic

institutions that are not only representative but also capable of governing effectively. The objective should be:

Democratic Accountability + Administrative Capacity = Sustainable Democratic Governance

Without administrative effectiveness, democracy may become associated with instability. Without democratic accountability, administrative power can become disconnected from citizens.

The Role of Political Culture

Institutions alone cannot protect democracy. Political culture also matters. Political culture refers to the values, expectations, attitudes, and behavioral patterns through which citizens and political elites understand politics. Pakistan's political culture has often been shaped by personalization, patronage, ideological confrontation, and distrust between political groups. At the same time, there is a strong public attachment to electoral participation and representative government.

The challenge is therefore to transform political culture from **winner-takes-all competition** into **constitutional competition**. Political leaders must accept that political opponents have legitimate rights. State institutions must understand that political neutrality is part of democratic stability. Citizens must also recognize that democracy involves institutions and procedures, not merely support for a preferred leader. A democratic political culture is developed slowly. It requires political education, stronger local government, internal party democracy, civic education, independent media, and meaningful parliamentary participation.

Contemporary Assessment: Pakistan's Democratic Position

Pakistan's contemporary political order is best described as a **hybrid and contested democratic system** rather than a conventional liberal democracy or a fully authoritarian regime. Freedom House continues to classify Pakistan as "Partly Free," highlighting the continuation of multiparty elections alongside significant military influence, restrictions on civil liberties, and pressure on media. International IDEA's democracy assessment similarly points toward deterioration in credible elections and elected government, indicating that formal democratic procedures alone do not capture the country's democratic condition.

The media environment also remains problematic. Pakistan's 2026 ranking in the World Press Freedom Index illustrates the difficulties faced by journalists and independent media. At the same time, Pakistan should not be placed in the same category as states where elections have disappeared or political parties have been completely eliminated. Political competition remains important. Citizens continue to engage with political parties, elections remain politically meaningful, and constitutional institutions continue to operate.

This produces a paradox:

Pakistan's democracy is weak enough to experience serious backsliding, but resilient enough to prevent complete democratic disappearance. This paradox is the central finding of the present analysis.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistan's democratic challenges require institutional reforms rather than temporary political arrangements.

- **Strengthening Civilian Supremacy**

The constitutional principle of civilian authority should be strengthened through clear institutional boundaries between elected governments and security institutions.

- **Improving Electoral Credibility**

The electoral process should become more transparent, predictable, and trusted by political competitors. Electoral dispute-resolution mechanisms should be strengthened, and election administration should maintain consistent standards for all political actors.

- **Strengthening Parliament**

Parliamentary committees should have stronger oversight powers. Legislative debate should be meaningful rather than merely procedural.

- **Encouraging Internal Party Democracy**

Political parties should institutionalize internal elections, transparent candidate selection, and greater participation of women and young people.

- **Protecting Judicial Independence**

Judicial reforms should strengthen professional independence while ensuring institutional transparency and accountability.

- **Protecting Media Freedom**

Journalists should be able to investigate political and governmental issues without intimidation. Regulation of digital platforms should protect citizens from genuine harm without becoming a mechanism for suppressing legitimate criticism.

- **Reducing Political Polarization**

Political leaders should revive norms of dialogue and parliamentary negotiation. Political disagreement should not automatically be treated as a threat to national security.

- **Strengthening Local Government**

Democracy becomes stronger when citizens experience meaningful political participation at the local level. Stable and empowered local governments can connect citizens directly with democratic institutions.

- **Promoting Civic Education**

Universities, schools, media organizations, and civil society should promote awareness of constitutional rights, democratic responsibilities, institutional roles, and political tolerance.

DISCUSSION

The central argument of this article is that democratic backsliding in Pakistan should not be understood as a simple movement from democracy to authoritarianism. Instead, it is a process of **gradual institutional erosion within a continuing electoral framework**. This distinction matters because conventional definitions of democracy can overlook important forms of institutional decline. If elections continue to take place, a country may still be classified as electoral democracy even when political competition becomes increasingly unequal. Pakistan's contemporary experience illustrates this problem. On the one hand, citizens continue to vote, political parties continue to compete, parliament continues to function, and constitutional institutions remain formally intact. On the other hand, military influence, restrictions on political freedoms, political polarization, electoral controversies, pressure on media, and institutional confrontation create serious obstacles to democratic consolidation. The situation can therefore be conceptualized as a **resilience–backsliding cycle**:

Institutional Pressure → Democratic Erosion → Public and Political Resistance → Institutional Adaptation → Partial Recovery → New Institutional Pressure

This cycle helps explain why Pakistan's democracy repeatedly appears unstable but does not completely disappear. The resilience of Pakistani democracy therefore should not be romanticized. Resilience is not the same as consolidation. An institution that survives repeated crises may still remain vulnerable. The long-term challenge is to transform resilience into consolidation.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan's democratic journey is neither a straightforward story of failure nor a simple story of progress. It is a continuing struggle between institutional weakness and institutional resilience. The country has made important democratic advances. Elections have become an established feature of political life, political parties have survived repeated crises, parliament continues to provide a constitutional forum, courts remain important actors, and civil society continues to participate in political debates. These developments demonstrate that democratic expectations remain deeply embedded in Pakistani society.

At the same time, democratic backsliding remains a serious concern. Military influence over political affairs, electoral controversies, political polarization, restrictions on media and expression, institutional confrontation, and weak parliamentary capacity continue to limit democratic consolidation. Contemporary assessments by Freedom House, International IDEA, and Reporters Without Borders provide external evidence of these continuing weaknesses. The most important conclusion is therefore that **Pakistan does not suffer from an absence of democratic institutions; it suffers from institutions whose autonomy, legitimacy, and effectiveness remain contested**.

The future of democracy will depend on whether political actors can shift their focus from controlling institutions to strengthening them. Civilian supremacy must become institutional rather than merely rhetorical. Elections must become more credible. Parliament must become more effective. Courts must remain independent. Media organizations must be able to operate freely. Political parties must develop internal democratic structures. Most importantly, political actors must accept that democratic competition is legitimate only when opponents are allowed to compete.

Democracy cannot be consolidated by one institution alone. It requires a political settlement in which parliament, judiciary, executive, military, political parties, media, civil society, and citizens recognize the

boundaries of their respective roles. Pakistan's democratic future therefore depends not simply on whether the next election is held, but on **whether institutions become strong enough to make political competition fair, constitutional, peaceful, and predictable**. The country's democratic resilience provides reason for cautious optimism. But resilience should not become an excuse for complacency. If democratic institutions are continuously pressured without meaningful reform, resilience may eventually weaken. Conversely, if existing institutions are strengthened through constitutionalism, accountability, political tolerance, and civilian institutional development, Pakistan can gradually move from a cycle of democratic survival toward genuine democratic consolidation.

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