



Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism



Civil Courage in Pakistan: Nonviolent Resistance to Authoritarian and Religious Power



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About the Author

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Civil resistance has long been recognized as a powerful means to challenge both authoritarian governance and the rise of radical religious movements. Pakistan provides a particularly instructive case where cycles of authoritarian regimes and religious radicalism have repeatedly undermined democratic development and civic freedoms. Yet, Pakistan's history also demonstrates how ordinary citizens, including lawyers, students, women, artists, and grassroots activists, have resisted nonviolently to reclaim political space and cultural agency.

This paper examines Pakistan's experiences of civil resistance against authoritarian and religious radical forces, highlighting three dimensions: (1) historical struggles against military authoritarianism; (2) societal resistance against religious radicalization; and (3) cultural and personal narratives of defiance. The methodology of this study is based on desk research, historical analysis of secondary sources, and personal narrative reflection. By situating Pakistan's resistance within both national and global contexts, this paper argues that authoritarianism and extremism thrive in the absence of fear. Still, nonviolent civic action, solidarity, and cultural expression can reimagine democratic futures. The findings contribute to global debates on civil resistance by offering insights from South Asia, particularly the role of youth, women, and cultural activists in countering authoritarianism and radicalism simultaneously.

1. Introduction

The global rise of authoritarian governance and religious radicalism presents one of the most pressing challenges for democracy, human rights, and civic freedoms in the twenty-first century. Around the world, authoritarian regimes erode constitutional checks and balances, restrict the media, undermine judicial independence, and manipulate elections to entrench power (Levitsky and Way 2010). At the same time, radical religious movements attempt to monopolize moral and cultural authority, often through rigid interpretations of faith that seek to reshape both public and private life. Together, these twin forces of authoritarianism and religious radicalism undermine inclusive, pluralistic societies by silencing dissent, excluding minorities, and promoting fear.



Civil resistance, defined as nonviolent collective action by ordinary people, has emerged as one of the most significant tools to challenge these threats. Rather than responding to coercion with counter-violence, civil resistance mobilizes legitimacy, mass participation, and moral authority. From Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent campaigns against colonial rule to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, history demonstrates the power of sustained civic action in forcing political change without resorting to armed conflict (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Civil resistance strategies, including protests, strikes, boycotts, advocacy campaigns, and cultural expressions, have proven adaptable across regions, allowing communities to resist oppression in ways that reflect their unique histories and values.

Pakistan provides a particularly instructive case study of how civil resistance operates under conditions of recurrent authoritarianism and rising religious radicalization. Since independence in 1947, the country has oscillated between weak civilian governments and extended periods of military rule. The repeated suspension of constitutional order and the instrumentalization of religion for political legitimacy have deeply shaped Pakistan's political culture (Jalal 1995). These dynamics have often constrained civil liberties, providing fertile ground for radical religious ideologies to flourish (Nasr 2001). The Afghan jihad of the 1980s, supported by external actors, accelerated this trajectory by expanding militant networks and normalizing radical discourse in society (Rashid 2000).

Yet Pakistan's history is not only one of authoritarian domination and religious extremism. It is also a history of ordinary people who have mobilized courageously and creatively to resist these forces. From student uprisings in the 1960s to the women-led defiance of General Zia-ul-Haq's Hudood Ordinances in the 1980s, to the Lawyers' Movement that forced General Pervez Musharraf's resignation in 2008, Pakistan's civil resistance movements demonstrate the resilience of its citizens. More recently, digital campaigns led by students and women's groups have shown how new technologies can expand civic participation even under conditions of censorship.

This paper situates Pakistan's trajectory of resistance within the broader global debate on nonviolent struggle. It seeks to answer three interrelated questions: (1) How have Pakistani citizens mobilized to resist authoritarian and extremist forces? (2) What methods and strategies have been most effective? (3) What lessons can global movements draw from Pakistan's experience? In addressing these questions, the paper highlights three dimensions: the historical struggles against military authoritarianism, societal resistance against religious radicalization, and cultural as well as personal narratives of defiance.

By weaving together political history, civil society mobilizations, and personal narratives, including the defacement of a feminist mural painted by young women in Islamabad, this study argues that civil resistance in Pakistan underscores two key lessons. First, authoritarianism and extremism thrive in fear and division. Second, nonviolent civic action, solidarity across social groups, and cultural expression can reimagine democratic futures. The Pakistani case, therefore, enriches global debates on resistance by illustrating the critical role of youth, women, and cultural activists in countering authoritarianism and radicalism simultaneously.

Historical Roots of Authoritarianism in Pakistan

Since its birth in 1947, Pakistan's democratic institutions have struggled to consolidate. Political instability, weak civilian leadership, and regional conflicts created conditions that enabled the military to intervene in politics repeatedly. Over time, Pakistan developed what scholars call a "praetorian state," in which the military assumes itself to be the ultimate guardian of national stability (Jalal 1995). This section examines three critical authoritarian eras: Ayub Khan (1958–1969), Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), and Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008), as well as the forms of civil resistance they provoked.

2.1 Ayub Khan's Era (1958–1969)

General Ayub Khan's coup in 1958 was Pakistan's first military takeover. Promising stability and modernization, Ayub introduced the system of "Basic Democracies," a carefully controlled form of representation where only local councilors could elect higher-level officials. While Ayub justified this as grassroots democracy, it was widely criticized as a mechanism to centralize power and weaken political parties.

During Ayub's rule, Pakistan saw significant economic growth, infrastructural development, and alliances with Western powers. However, political freedom shrank considerably. The Press and Publications Ordinance of 1960 restricted the media, opposition parties were harassed, and student unions were curtailed. Despite this repression, dissent gradually spread.

By the mid-1960s, two issues sparked widespread resistance: the 1965 war with India, which undermined Ayub's claims to strong leadership, and the growing economic inequality between East and West Pakistan. Student movements in Karachi, Lahore, and Dhaka organized sit-ins, rallies, and strikes. Workers joined in, protesting low wages and poor conditions. Intellectuals and poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz gave voice to public anger through cultural resistance.

In 1968–69, protests reached a climax when students, workers, and opposition parties joined in coordinated demonstrations. The protests combined strikes, marches, and civil disobedience, paralyzing the state. Facing an untenable situation, Ayub resigned in March 1969, handing power to General Yahya Khan. Although this transition did not bring a stable democracy, the episode revealed the potential of broad-based civil resistance in confronting authoritarian regimes.

2.2 Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization (1977–1988)

General Zia-ul-Haq's coup in 1977 marked a turning point in Pakistan's political and ideological trajectory. Unlike Ayub, who had emphasized modernization, Zia built his legitimacy on Islamization. He suspended the constitution, imposed martial law, and sought to fuse political authority with religious conservatism.

His regime introduced sweeping Islamization measures: the Hudood Ordinances criminalized adultery and fornication, disproportionately targeting women; blasphemy laws were strengthened; and the Qisas and Diyat laws institutionalized corporal punishments. Simultaneously, Zia oversaw the expansion of madrasa networks, many of which were funded by Saudi Arabia and oriented toward conservative or militant ideologies (Nasr 2001). The Afghan jihad further militarized Pakistan's society, embedding radical networks that would later destabilize the country (Rashid 2000).

Civil resistance during Zia's period was especially difficult given the severity of repression. Political parties were banned, journalists were flogged, and thousands of activists were jailed. Yet resistance persisted. The Women's Action Forum (WAF), founded in 1981, courageously challenged discriminatory laws. Members organized demonstrations against the Hudood Ordinances, documented abuses, and forged alliances with lawyers and human rights activists. Though often met with tear gas and police violence, WAF's activism kept the issue of women's rights alive in the national consciousness (Shaheed 2010).

Artists and poets also resisted. Habib Jalib's poetry became a rallying cry against dictatorship, and theater groups staged plays critiquing authoritarianism under the guise of cultural performance. Despite censorship, underground literature circulated widely.

While Zia's sudden death in a plane crash in 1988 ended his rule, the legacies of his Islamization policies endure. They reshaped Pakistan's legal system, normalized the use of religion in politics, and emboldened radical groups. At the same time, WAF and other resistance movements planted seeds for a vibrant women's rights discourse that continues to shape activism today.

2.3 Pervez Musharraf's Rule (1999–2008)

General Pervez Musharraf seized power in October 1999 after ousting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Initially, Musharraf styled himself as a "modernizer," promoting the vision of "enlightened moderation." His government implemented economic reforms and expanded private media channels.

However, Musharraf's regime soon revealed authoritarian tendencies. Political opponents were sidelined, dissenting journalists were harassed, and the 17th Amendment consolidated presidential powers. Civil resistance intensified after 2007 when Musharraf attempted to dismiss Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. This triggered the Lawyers' Movement, one of the most significant civil resistance campaigns in Pakistan's history.

Lawyers across the country boycotted courts, organized rallies, and marched through city streets. Clad in black coats, they became visible symbols of defiance. The movement drew support from journalists, students, and opposition parties, creating a broad coalition. Despite police crackdowns and arrests, the protests gained momentum. Television coverage further amplified the movement, inspiring solidarity across Pakistan's urban centers.

The Lawyers' Movement ultimately forced Musharraf to reinstate the Chief Justice and eventually resign in 2008 (International Crisis Group 2007). This episode underscored the power of professional credibility in mobilizing resistance. Unlike students or labor unions, who could be dismissed as radical or self-interested, lawyers were seen as guardians of justice. Their struggle provided a template for how civil resistance can reclaim democratic institutions.

Section Summary

Across these three eras, Pakistan's citizens demonstrated that authoritarian regimes, no matter how entrenched, are vulnerable to sustained civic mobilization. Ayub Khan faced student-worker uprisings, Zia-ul-Haq was challenged by women's groups and cultural activists, and lawyers and civil society coalitions brought down Musharraf. These experiences reveal a recurring pattern: authoritarianism in Pakistan thrives on repression, but it is continually contested by diverse sectors of society using nonviolent means.



3. Rise of Religious Radicalism

Religious radicalism in Pakistan has deep domestic roots but is also deeply shaped by global geopolitics. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has witnessed the proliferation of radical groups that challenge the state, attack minorities, and undermine democratic freedoms. The rise of radicalism cannot be understood in isolation; it is the product of state policies, international conflicts, and socio-economic conditions that created fertile ground for extremist ideologies.

3.1 Early Roots and State Patronage

From the outset, Pakistan's founders invoked religion to justify the creation of a separate homeland for Muslims. However, the precise role of Islam in the state was contested. Successive governments oscillated between secular governance and religious accommodation. The Objectives Resolution of 1949 declared that sovereignty ultimately belonged to God, embedding religion into Pakistan's constitutional framework. While intended as a symbolic statement, it provided future regimes with justification to expand religious authority in politics (Jalal 1995).

Authoritarian rulers, particularly military regimes, used religion to bolster their legitimacy. General Ayub Khan, though personally secular in outlook, promoted Islam as a unifying identity against ethnic nationalism. Yet it was General Zia-ul-Haq who systematically Islamized the legal, educational, and political systems. His policies normalized the use of religion as a political tool, creating conditions in which radical groups could flourish.

3.2 The Afghan Jihad and International Involvement

The most significant catalyst for radicalization was the Afghan jihad (1979–1989). After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became the frontline state supporting the Afghan mujahedin fighters. Billions of dollars in funding and weapons flowed through Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies (Rashid 2000). Madrasa networks expanded exponentially, many teaching militant interpretations of Islam.

While the Afghan jihad was framed as a noble struggle against foreign occupation, it produced long-term consequences for Pakistan. First, it created vast networks of armed fighters who later turned inward, challenging the Pakistani state. Second, it entrenched a culture of jihad that extended beyond Afghanistan, with Pakistani militant groups pursuing agendas in Kashmir and domestically. Third, it blurred the line between state and non-state actors, as Pakistan's intelligence agencies cultivated militant proxies for strategic depth.

3.3 Sectarian Radicalism

Religious radicalism in Pakistan also took the form of sectarian conflict. The 1980s saw the rise of groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its militant offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which targeted Shia communities. These organizations received funding from Gulf states and promoted a rigid Deobandi interpretation of Islam opposed to Shiism (Nasr 2001). Sectarian violence escalated into targeted killings, attacks on processions, and bombings of mosques.



The sectarian divide not only fragmented Pakistan's social fabric but also weakened the state's ability to promote inclusive governance. By the 1990s, sectarian groups had penetrated mainstream politics, with some leaders contesting elections and forming alliances with larger parties. This mainstreaming blurred the distinctions between democratic participation and extremist ideology, giving radicals a sense of political legitimacy.

3.4 Post-9/11 Radicalization

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, Musharraf's regime banned several militant groups and aligned with Western powers. However, this alliance also triggered a backlash. Groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged, accusing the state of betraying Islam. They launched brutal attacks on Pakistani civilians, schools, and security forces.

The 2007 siege of Lal Masjid in Islamabad epitomized the crisis. Radical clerics occupied the mosque, calling for the imposition of Sharia. When the military stormed the compound, hundreds were killed, sparking outrage among radicals nationwide. In subsequent years, suicide bombings and assassinations targeted not only state institutions but also cultural spaces. The 2014 massacre at the Army Public School in Peshawar, which killed over 130 children, underscored the brutality of extremist violence and shocked the nation.



3.5 Impact on Society and Culture

The consequences of radicalization have been devastating. Social cohesion has eroded as communities grow increasingly polarized along sectarian and ideological lines. Cultural expression has been stifled—musicians, artists, and writers face intimidation. Women and minorities are disproportionately targeted, as radical groups enforce patriarchal norms and suppress alternative worldviews (Weiss 2014).

At the same time, the rise of radicalism has produced a climate of fear that affects everyday life. Journalists self-censor to avoid reprisals, activists face threats, and moderate religious leaders are silenced. The assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in 2011 by his own bodyguard, for speaking against blasphemy laws, demonstrated the deep penetration of radical ideology even within state institutions.

3.6 State Responses and Ambiguities

The state's response to radicalism has been inconsistent. While successive governments have launched military operations against extremist strongholds, they have often hesitated to confront the ideological infrastructure of radicalism. Laws introduced during Zia's period, such as the blasphemy laws, remain politically untouchable. Political parties continue to court religious groups for electoral gains. This ambiguity has allowed radical ideologies to persist despite military victories on the battlefield.

Section Summary

Religious radicalism in Pakistan cannot be explained solely as a grassroots phenomenon. It is the product of state policies, international conflicts, sectarian dynamics, and socio-economic conditions. While radical groups have weakened the state and terrorized society, they have also provoked new forms of civil resistance, from women's marches to cultural movements that seek to reclaim public space from extremism.

4. Civil Resistance in Action

Civil resistance in Pakistan has taken diverse forms, reflecting the creativity, resilience, and courage of ordinary citizens. From street protests to cultural expression, from women's marches to digital campaigns, Pakistanis have repeatedly mobilized against authoritarianism and religious radicalism. This section highlights some of the most significant movements: the Lawyers' Movement, women's activism, student and youth mobilization, and cultural/artistic resistance.

4.1 The Lawyers' Movement (2007–2009) – Expanded with Key Figures

The Lawyers' Movement remains one of the most iconic episodes of civil resistance in Pakistan's history. It began in March 2007, when General Pervez Musharraf suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. The dismissal was widely viewed as an attempt to weaken judicial independence. In response, lawyers across Pakistan organized boycotts of courts, rallies, and marches demanding Chaudhry's reinstatement (International Crisis Group 2007).

The movement was remarkable for several reasons. First, it demonstrated the power of **professional legitimacy**. Unlike students or labor unions, lawyers carried an aura of authority and respect. Their black coats became symbols of defiance.

Second, the movement quickly drew in **prominent figures** whose leadership and visibility galvanized public support, among them were Aitzaz Ahsan, Munir A. Malik, Ali Ahmad Kurd, and Hamid Khan. These leaders coordinated marches, sit-ins, and rallies across Pakistan's cities, particularly in Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Quetta. Their leadership transformed the movement into a national struggle for judicial independence.

Third, the movement quickly expanded beyond lawyers. Journalists, students, civil society activists, and opposition parties joined, creating a **broad coalition of resistance**. The role of independent television channels such as Geo News was also critical, broadcasting live coverage of protests and police crackdowns, amplifying the struggle to millions of Pakistanis.

Despite brutal repression, including baton charges, tear gas, and mass arrests, the lawyers persisted. Their marches and sit-ins brought life in major cities to a standstill. Musharraf's government attempted to intimidate leaders by imprisoning them, but public anger only grew stronger.

The Lawyers' Movement ultimately forced Musharraf to reinstate the Chief Justice and contributed to his resignation in 2008. Although subsequent political controversies tarnished some of its leaders, the movement remains a landmark in Pakistan's history. It underscored the capacity of professional associations, when united and credible, to spearhead democratic mobilization in ways that transcended class and ideology.

4.2 Women's Movements: From WAF to Aurat March

Women's activism has been central to resisting authoritarianism and religious radicalism in Pakistan. During General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, when discriminatory laws such as the Hudood Ordinances were imposed, women organized under the Women's Action Forum (WAF). Among its pioneering leaders were **Asma Jahangir, Hina Jilani, Nighat Said Khan, Khadija Haq, Farida Shaheed, Shehla Zia, Najma Sadeque, and, later, Beena Sarwar**, who together staged demonstrations, challenged legal provisions, and created networks of solidarity among women lawyers, academics, and activists (Shaheed 2010). Their resistance was often met with police brutality, but it laid the foundation for a vibrant feminist movement.

In contemporary Pakistan, the Aurat March has emerged as the most visible form of women-led resistance. Initiated in 2018, the Aurat March is held annually on International Women's Day across major cities. It demands equality, bodily autonomy, an end to harassment, and recognition of women's contributions to society. Placards and slogans from the march, such as "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" (My Body, My Choice), have sparked national debate.

The Aurat March represents both continuity and transformation. Like WAF, it challenges patriarchal and authoritarian religious narratives. But unlike earlier movements, it leverages digital platforms to mobilize younger generations. Its inclusivity, bringing together women, transgender persons, and marginalized communities, illustrates the evolving face of civil resistance in Pakistan (Weiss 2014).



Activists from Women Action Forum (WAF), female lawyers from People's Lawyers Forum and other rights groups struggle to break a police cordon outside Mazar-e-Quaida-e-Azam in Karachi February 12, 1983. They defied ban on rallies imposed by the military dictatorship of general Zia-ul-Haq to protest against the discriminatory Law of Evidence. Photo: Zahid Hussein

4.3 Student and Youth Activism

Students have historically played a pivotal role in Pakistan's resistance movements. In the 1960s, they were at the forefront of the protests that led to the downfall of Ayub Khan. Student unions once served as training grounds for political leadership. However, successive regimes banned or weakened student unions, fearing their mobilizing potential.

Despite these restrictions, youth activism has persisted. In recent years, the Students' Solidarity March has emerged as a powerful platform. Organized across multiple cities, it demands the restoration of student unions, an end to harassment on campuses, and greater investment in education. The marches, often coordinated through social media, demonstrate how digital tools allow youth to circumvent censorship and build national networks.

Pakistan's demographic reality amplifies the importance of youth activism. With nearly 60 percent of the population under the age of 30, young people play a central role in shaping civic discourse (Yusuf 2009). Their ability to mobilize around issues of education, gender equality, and democratic freedoms makes them a critical force in resisting authoritarian and extremist narratives.

4.4 Cultural and Artistic Resistance

Culture has long served as a vehicle of resistance in Pakistan. During authoritarian eras, when formal politics was tightly controlled, poetry, music, and theater became mediums of dissent. Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib articulated the aspirations of the marginalized, giving voice to opposition against dictatorship. Their poems were recited in protests, set to music, and circulated underground.

In contemporary Pakistan, cultural resistance continues in new forms. Music platforms like Coke Studio blend traditional and modern styles, celebrating diversity against homogenizing influence of extremist ideologies (Lodhi 2019). Theater groups such as Ajoka use satire to critique authoritarianism, while comedians employ humor to highlight social contradictions. Public art, such as murals painted during the Aurat March, creates visible challenges to patriarchal and radical narratives.

Satire has also thrived online. Social media influencers and comedians use parody to expose corruption, hypocrisy, and extremism. These forms of expression reach audiences that formal activism often cannot, particularly young people.

4.5 Global Connections and Comparisons

Pakistan's civil resistance movements resonate with global struggles. The Lawyers' Movement shares parallels with movements in Eastern Europe where professional associations resisted authoritarian control. The Aurat March connects with global feminist mobilizations such as the Women's March in the U.S. Student protests in Pakistan mirror the youth-led climate strikes worldwide. Cultural resistance through poetry and art recalls South Africa's anti-apartheid cultural campaigns.

These comparisons highlight that while Pakistan's struggles are rooted in local contexts, they are also part of a global tradition of nonviolent resistance. Lessons flow in both directions: Pakistan offers insights into resisting hybrid regimes and religious radicalism, while global movements provide solidarity and inspiration.

Section Summary

Civil resistance in Pakistan takes many forms, such as professional, feminist, youth-led, and cultural. Each of these movements demonstrates the capacity of ordinary citizens to reclaim civic space under conditions of repression. Despite threats and violence, Pakistanis have repeatedly shown that nonviolent action can challenge authoritarian rulers and extremist ideologies. Importantly, these movements are interconnected: women's activism often overlaps with student mobilization, cultural expression reinforces political protests, and digital platforms link diverse actors. Together, they create a mosaic of resistance that continues to shape Pakistan's democratic trajectory.



5. Case Study: The Mural Incident

Civil resistance in Pakistan is not confined to formal movements; it is also deeply embedded in everyday acts of cultural defiance. One illustrative example is the 2020 mural incident in Islamabad, which highlights how artistic expression becomes a site of confrontation between progressive youth and reactionary religious forces.

In the lead-up to the annual Aurat March, a group of young women, including my youngest daughter, a visual artist, and her university peers, decided to paint a public mural, the first ever in Islamabad. The artwork celebrated themes of women's freedom, equality, and hope for a more inclusive Pakistan. Bright colors, slogans of solidarity, and symbolic imagery conveyed the message that women have a rightful place in the nation's public and political life. For young artists, brushes and paint were tools of civil resistance, a peaceful, creative, and hopeful assertion of dignity.



However, before the mural could be completed, a group of clerics and their followers stormed the site. They condemned the artwork as “obscene” and “against Sharia,” and in full view of police officers, they spray-painted black ink over the drawings. They replaced the vibrant symbols of equality with sectarian slogans and religious warnings. The police, despite being present, took no action to protect the artists or their work.

The incident revealed two key dynamics of civil resistance in Pakistan. First, it showed how **nonviolent creativity is often met with violent suppression**. Extremists, unable to tolerate alternative narratives, rely on intimidation and destruction. Second, it demonstrated the **fear that radical groups harbor toward the voices of youth and women**. The very act of young women occupying public space through art challenged entrenched gender and power hierarchies.

As a father, I witnessed not only the defacement of art but also the attempt to erase young people's aspirations. Yet the incident also provided a powerful lesson: while extremists may blacken walls, they cannot erase the vision of equality and freedom. The memory of the mural and the courage of those who painted it continue to inspire resistance. This case illustrates the importance of cultural and personal narratives in broader civil resistance movements.

6. Challenges Facing Civil Resistance

While Pakistan's history demonstrates the power of nonviolent struggle, civil resistance today faces formidable obstacles. These challenges not only limit the effectiveness of movements but also reveal the structural difficulties of sustaining democratic activism in a hybrid regime marked by authoritarian tendencies and religious radicalism.

6.1 Shrinking Civic Space

In recent years, civic space in Pakistan has contracted significantly. The government has introduced restrictive laws on NGOs, requiring cumbersome registration processes and monitoring of foreign funding. Civil society organizations working on human rights and democracy are often accused of advancing "foreign agendas." Simultaneously, media censorship has intensified. Television channels are pressured to avoid sensitive topics, while journalists critical of the establishment face intimidation, forced disappearances, or even assassination. Digital surveillance further constrains activists, as online dissent is increasingly criminalized.



6.2 Violence and Intimidation

Extremist groups regularly target journalists, activists, and women leaders. Threats of violence force many into self-censorship or exile. The assassination of **Benazir Bhutto in 2007** and **Salman Taseer in 2011** underscored the lethal risks of challenging extremism. Women at the Aurat March often face harassment, doxxing campaigns, and threats of sexual violence. These tactics create a climate of fear that discourages participation in public activism.

6.3 Instrumentalization of Religion

The state's historical reliance on religious rhetoric weakens secular democratic resistance. Laws introduced under Zia-ul-Haq, particularly the blasphemy laws, remain politically untouchable. Religious parties, though electorally weak, wield outsized influence by mobilizing street power. Their ability to threaten mass unrest deters governments from reforming discriminatory laws or protecting the rights of minorities. This dynamic entrenches a cycle where religious radicalism undermines democracy, and the state, rather than confronting it, often appeases it.

6.4 Fragmentation of Civil Society

Civil society in Pakistan is vibrant but fragmented. Ethnic, sectarian, and class divides hinder unified mobilization. While lawyers, women, students, and cultural activists have each resisted authoritarianism, coordination across these groups is often limited. Rural communities, in particular, remain disconnected from urban-centered movements. This fragmentation allows authoritarian and radical forces to exploit divisions and weaken collective action.

6.5 Hybrid Governance and the Military's Role

Pakistan's current "hybrid" political arrangement, where civilian governments operate under the shadow of unelected military influence, further complicates resistance (Yusuf 2009). Protest movements often find themselves caught between criticizing civilian leaders and confronting the deeper structural dominance of the military. This blurring of lines between civilian and military authority makes accountability elusive and narrows the space for genuine democratic reform.

Section Summary

The mural incident illustrates the personal courage and cultural creativity that characterize Pakistan's civil resistance. Yet, the broader challenges of shrinking civic space, violence, the instrumentalization of religion, fragmentation, and hybrid governance limit the ability of movements to achieve lasting change. Overcoming these obstacles requires building cross-sector coalitions, expanding digital and international solidarity, and persistently defending civic freedoms despite repression.

7. Theoretical Insights: Why Civil Resistance Matters

Pakistan's experiences with civil resistance provide fertile ground for drawing theoretical insights relevant to both scholars and practitioners of nonviolent struggle. While every context has unique features, the Pakistani case highlights patterns that resonate globally.

7.1 Professional Legitimacy as Leverage

One of the most striking lessons from Pakistan is the role of **professional credibility**. The Lawyers' Movement demonstrated how professional associations, when united, can mobilize not only their own members but also broader society. The image of black-coated lawyers marching through the streets became a powerful symbol of justice and integrity. This suggests that civil resistance is most effective when led by groups whose social standing commands respect, such as lawyers, doctors, or teachers. Their involvement lends legitimacy to protests, making it harder for regimes to dismiss them as fringe or radical.

7.2 Women's Leadership as Transformative

Another critical insight is the **transformative role of women's leadership**. From the Women's Action Forum in the 1980s to the Aurat March today, women have not only resisted authoritarian and extremist policies but also broadened the democratic struggle by linking it to gender equality. Women's leadership introduces issues such as bodily autonomy, domestic violence, and reproductive rights that authoritarian regimes and religious radicals often suppress. The visibility of women in public protests also destabilizes patriarchal hierarchies, showing that democracy must be inclusive to be meaningful (Shaheed 2010; Weiss 2014).

7.3 Culture as Counter-Narrative

Authoritarianism and extremism thrive on narratives of fear, obedience, and conformity. Cultural expressions, including poetry, music, theater, murals, and satire, serve as a counter-narrative that delegitimizes these ideologies. In Pakistan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's verses were recited at rallies, Habib Jalib's poetry became a cry against dictatorship, and modern platforms like Coke Studio celebrate diversity against homogenizing ideologies (Lodhi 2019). These cultural forms often reach audiences beyond formal politics, subtly reshaping values and aspirations.

7.4 Youth as Critical Actors

Pakistan's demographic reality underscores the centrality of youth. With nearly 60 percent of the population under 30, young people possess disproportionate influence in shaping discourse. Youth-led campaigns, such as the Students' Solidarity March, demonstrate how digital platforms enable cross-regional organizing despite repression. Youth activism is not merely reactive but visionary, demanding systemic reforms in education, employment, and governance. Theoretical frameworks of resistance must therefore account for demographic dynamics, recognizing how youth bulges can energize civic movements (Yusuf 2009).

7.5 Persistence and Memory

Ultimately, Pakistan exemplifies the significance of perseverance and collective memory. Even when movements are suppressed, their legacies endure. The Lawyers' Movement continues to inspire debates on judicial independence. The Women's Action Forum laid the foundation for today's feminist activism. The memory of past struggles becomes a resource for future mobilizations. This continuity shows that civil resistance is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of contesting power, shaping norms, and reclaiming space.

8. Global Lessons from Pakistan

While rooted in Pakistan's unique history, these insights carry broader implications for global struggles against authoritarianism and extremism.

8.1 Resistance Must Be Locally Rooted

Civil resistance is most effective when anchored in local culture and history. Pakistan's movements succeeded when they drew on familiar symbols, such as lawyers' black coats, feminist slogans in Urdu, and poetry rooted in national traditions. Imported strategies without cultural resonance rarely mobilize mass participation. This echoes global findings that localization enhances legitimacy (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).



8.2 Authoritarianism and Extremism Reinforce Each Other

Pakistan demonstrates that authoritarian regimes and religious radicals often function symbiotically. Military rulers have historically used religion to legitimize their authority, while extremist groups exploit authoritarian repression to expand influence. Resistance movements must therefore confront both simultaneously. A narrow focus on democracy without addressing radicalism—or vice versa—leaves movements vulnerable.

8.3 Personal and Community Narratives Humanize Struggles

The mural incident in Islamabad illustrates how personal stories make abstract struggles tangible. Narratives of individual courage, whether a student facing arrest, a woman defying patriarchal laws, or a lawyer braving baton charges, humanize movements and generate empathy. Globally, such narratives strengthen solidarity across borders.

8.4 International Solidarity Amplifies Local Voices

Global networks of solidarity amplify local struggles, but genuine change emerges from grassroots courage. International organizations, diaspora communities, and transnational feminist networks have supported Pakistani activists by providing visibility, resources, and advocacy. However, sustainable transformation depends on local ownership. The balance between external support and internal agency is crucial.

8.5 Nonviolent Creativity as a Universal Tool

Perhaps the most powerful global lesson is the enduring effectiveness of nonviolent creativity. Whether through art, satire, or professional mobilization, Pakistan shows that nonviolent action can destabilize authoritarian narratives and create spaces of hope. This resonates with movements from Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution to Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, affirming the universality of civil resistance.

Section Summary

Together, Pakistan's experiences and the lessons they generate emphasize that civil resistance is a multidimensional phenomenon. It thrives on legitimacy, inclusivity, culture, youth energy, persistence, and global solidarity. These elements provide a theoretical and practical roadmap for resisting authoritarianism and extremism worldwide.

9. Civil Resistance Dimension

Civil resistance in Pakistan is not a single movement but a tapestry of strategies and practices employed by diverse actors. Each form of resistance, such as professional, feminist, youth-led, and cultural, illustrates different methods, yet they share common principles of nonviolence, persistence, and solidarity.

9.1 Methods of Resistance

- **Protests and Demonstrations:** From student uprisings in the 1960s to the Lawyers' Movement and the Aurat March, street demonstrations remain a primary tool. They signal public dissent, disrupt authoritarian control, and create visible solidarity.
- **Advocacy and Legal Challenges:** Lawyers and women's groups have frequently used legal avenues to contest discriminatory laws, file petitions, and demand accountability. These actions strengthen institutional legitimacy while resisting authoritarian manipulation.
- **Networks and Alliances:** Cross-sector coalitions have been critical. For instance, during the Lawyers' Movement, lawyers allied with journalists, civil society organizations, and political parties. Similarly, WAF collaborated with human rights activists to amplify women's issues.
- **Cultural Expression:** Poetry, murals, theater, and satire continue to challenge both authoritarianism and extremism by reshaping narratives and values. Culture offers a form of resistance less vulnerable to repression than formal politics.
- **Digital Activism:** Over the last decade, social media has created new opportunities for activism. Hashtags, viral videos, and online campaigns, such as #StudentsSolidarityMarch and #AuratMarch, connect geographically dispersed activists and attract international attention despite state censorship.

9.2 Lessons from Practice

Pakistan's resistance demonstrates that nonviolent strategies are adaptable. When formal political institutions are closed, activists turn to cultural or digital spaces. When repression is severe, persistence and symbolic acts such as reciting banned poetry sustain morale. The lesson is that civil resistance thrives not by replicating a single method but by constantly innovating to exploit openings and challenge repression.

9.3 Enduring Impact

Even when movements do not achieve immediate goals, they shape political culture. The Lawyers' Movement instilled expectations of judicial independence. WAF and the Aurat March transformed the discourse on women's rights. Student protests revived demands for democratic participation in education. These enduring impacts show that civil resistance is not merely reactive but transformative, planting seeds for long-term change.

10. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Pakistan's history demonstrates that authoritarianism and religious radicalism may rise repeatedly, but so does civil resistance. Each cycle of repression has generated new forms of nonviolent struggle. From students who toppled Ayub Khan, to women who defied Zia's Hudood Ordinances, to lawyers who challenged Musharraf, to youth and artists resisting today's radicalization, the Pakistani story illustrates the resilience of civic courage.

The mural incident in Islamabad is emblematic: extremists may blacken walls, but they cannot erase the vision of equality and dignity. The persistence of these struggles affirms that civil resistance is rooted not only in politics but also in culture, memory, and everyday acts of defiance.

10.1 Policy Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen Civic Space:** The state must protect freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Restrictive NGO laws and media censorship undermine democratic resilience.
- 2. Support Cross-Sector Coalitions:** Activists, scholars, and international partners should encourage alliances between lawyers, women, students, and cultural workers. Such networks magnify collective power.
- 3. Promote Inclusive Education:** Educational institutions should foster critical thinking, gender equality, and civic responsibility, countering radical narratives from an early age.
- 4. Reform Legal Frameworks:** Laws weaponized for repression, particularly those inherited from Zia's era, require urgent review. Protecting minorities and women is essential for an inclusive democracy.
- 5. Leverage Digital Platforms Responsibly:** Activists should harness digital tools for advocacy, while policymakers must ensure digital freedoms are not curtailed under the pretext of security.

6. Foster International Solidarity: Global networks can provide visibility, protection, and resources to local movements. However, support must respect local agency and avoid imposing external agendas.

7. Institutionalize Cultural Resistance: Public funding and protection for art, literature, and media that celebrate pluralism can help shift societal values away from radical ideologies.

10.2 Final Reflection

Civil resistance in Pakistan underscores two enduring truths. First, authoritarianism and extremism feed on fear, but they are not invincible. Second, courage, solidarity, and creativity can carve out spaces of hope even in the darkest times. The world can learn from Pakistan that democracy is not a gift delivered from above; it is an achievement sustained from below, by citizens who refuse to be silenced.

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