

Military's Role in Politics: A comparative study of Pakistan and Turkey

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Abstract

Pakistan and Turkey share a history marked by repeated military interventions in politics; however, the two countries differ significantly in their institutional frameworks, legal systems and societal responses to military involvement in governance. This study offers a comparative analysis of the political role of the military in both countries, with a particular focus on military coups, the evolution of civil-military relations and patterns of governance. By analyzing the constitutional arrangements and the struggle for civilian supremacy, the paper explores how militarization has shaped political trajectories in each state. Drawing on scholarly literature, archival sources and academic texts. The study highlights the conditions that have facilitated military dominance and assesses the influence of democratic governance on civil-military dynamics in Pakistan and Turkey.

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Introduction

The involvement of the military in political affairs is neither new nor uncommon; it has been a defining characteristic of numerous states, particularly those grappling with fragile democratic institutions, complex geopolitical environments, or histories marked by authoritarianism. Among the most prominent examples of persistent military interference in politics are Pakistan and Turkey. In both cases, the armed forces have extended their roles far beyond the traditional responsibility of defending national borders. They have played a decisive part in shaping political trajectories, influencing governance structures, framing constitutional orders and even dictating social norms. This research conducts a strategic

comparison of the political evolution of Pakistan and Turkey with respect to military influence. It aims to explore the mechanisms, motivations and consequences of military interventions in both countries. Specifically, it seeks to answer how, why and through what institutional and extrajudicial channels the military has consistently intervened in the political realm and what long-term implications these interventions have had for democratic consolidation. Pakistan and Turkey present compelling cases for comparative analysis due to the striking parallels in their civil-military relations. Both countries have experienced multiple military coups: Pakistan in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999; and Turkey in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1997 and a failed attempt in 2016 (Finer, 1962).

The justifications for these interventions have typically centered on political instability, pervasive corruption and perceived threats to national ideology. In both contexts, the military has positioned itself as the guardian of the state's foundational principles. Pakistan's armed forces have invoked the "Ideology of Pakistan" and Islamic identity, while Turkey's military historically defended Kemalist secularism. Even during periods of civilian rule, the militaries in both countries have retained substantial behind-the-scenes influence, often exercising *de facto* veto power over key policy areas such as national security and foreign relations. However, the trajectories of military influence in the two nations have diverged in recent years. In Turkey, the political dominance of the military has been considerably diminished under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has consolidated civilian control through constitutional amendments, purges of the military elite and the construction of a loyal security apparatus (Zaheer D. M., 2025; Tas, 2024). Conversely, in Pakistan, the military remains the most powerful institution in the country, wielding considerable influence over foreign policy, internal politics and economic ventures, notably through its expansive commercial network. Additionally, the geopolitical orientations of the two militaries differ significantly. Turkey's armed forces are deeply integrated into Western security frameworks, particularly NATO, whereas Pakistan's military maintains a more complex and flexible geopolitical posture, balancing relationships with the United States, China and key Middle Eastern states (Ehsan, 2020).

This study investigates the depth and nuances of civil-military dynamics in Pakistan and Turkey by addressing key questions: Why have militaries in both countries attained such enduring political authority? How do their methods of political engagement differ? And what accounts for Turkey's relative success in curbing military influence compared to Pakistan's continued praetorianism? Through a detailed examination of historical developments, institutional frameworks and contemporary shifts, this research seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how military interventionism shapes, constrains and often undermines democratic processes in strategically vital states. As Hippel (2000) aptly notes, when the military becomes a political actor, democracy transforms into a managed spectacle rather than a functioning system of governance (Hippel, *Democracy By Force*, 2000; Zaheer D. M., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study of civil-military relations is firmly grounded in the disciplines of political science and sociology, offering various theoretical approaches to analyze the interaction between military institutions and civilian political authority. These frameworks are particularly useful when comparing Pakistan and Turkey two countries where the military has historically exercised considerable political influence and, at times, direct control. Key theories that inform this analysis include Samuel P. Huntington's institutional theory,

Morris Janowitz's convergence theory, the praetorianism model, principal-agent theory and the concept of path dependency. Each offers a distinct perspective on military intervention and its implications for democratic governance.

Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* (1957) introduces the concept of objective civilian control, arguing that a professional military should remain apolitical and subordinate to elected civilian leadership. According to Huntington, optimal civil-military relations are achieved when civilians define policy goals while granting the military autonomy over operational matters. However, Pakistan represents a clear deviation from this model. The military has frequently overstepped its professional boundaries staging coups in 1958, 1977 and 1999 and continues to exert influence over key areas such as foreign and security policy, even under civilian governments. In Turkey, Huntington's model is similarly challenged. The Turkish military historically exercised subjective control, intervening in politics through coups in 1960, 1980 and 1997, often justifying its actions as necessary to preserve the Kemalist secular order. In doing so, it positioned itself as a political actor rather than a neutral institution.

In contrast, Morris Janowitz, in *The Professional Soldier* (1960), proposes the convergence theory, which suggests that the military inevitably mirrors the broader society, adapting to its values and engaging in non-traditional roles such as economic management and governance. This theory is particularly relevant to Pakistan, where the military plays a dominant role not only in defense but also in economic affairs through enterprises like the Fauji Foundation and exercises considerable political influence via institutions such as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). In Turkey, the military's role in shaping public life especially in areas like secular education and bureaucratic appointments was once aligned with Janowitz's model. However, under President Erdoğan's leadership, especially after the failed 2016 coup attempt and subsequent purges, Turkey has witnessed a reassertion of civilian supremacy, suggesting a departure from the convergence model.

The concept of praetorianism, as developed by Eric A. Nordlinger (1977), provides another critical lens through which to understand military intervention in politics. In praetorian states, where civilian institutions are weak, political competition is fragmented and legitimacy is contested, the military often assumes the role of a guardian of national stability. This model is vividly applicable to both Pakistan and Turkey. In Pakistan, the military has repeatedly portrayed its interventions as necessary to prevent chaos, counter corruption, or safeguard national interests—often invoking the threat of Islamist extremism. Similarly, Turkey's military long justified its political involvement as essential for defending secularism and national unity, particularly in response to Kurdish separatism. Nonetheless, Erdoğan's political consolidation and systemic reforms have since curtailed the military's praetorian role.

Further analytical depth is offered by principal-agent theory, which explains the difficulties civilian governments face in controlling militaries. Civilian authorities (principals) often lack the information, expertise, or coercive capacity to monitor and discipline military agents effectively. This imbalance is evident in both Pakistan and Turkey, where militaries have leveraged their organizational cohesion and institutional autonomy to resist civilian oversight. Additionally, the theory of path dependency helps explain why military dominance persists in these countries. The historical precedent of military coups has institutionalized a political culture in which military intervention is normalized, creating self-reinforcing cycles of authoritarianism and democratic fragility.

History of Civilian and Military Rule in Pakistan

Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has experienced persistent military intervention in political affairs, positioning the armed forces as the country's dominant political actor. This pattern of military dominance was entrenched during the formative years of statehood, characterized by political instability, weak institutions and fragile civilian governance. The first direct military takeover in 1958 under General Ayub Khan institutionalized the armed forces' role as political arbitrators, setting a precedent for subsequent coups in 1969, 1977 and 1999. This continuity of military interference in democratic processes reflects the entrenchment of praetorianism, a phenomenon where the military views itself as the ultimate guardian of national interest, often at the expense of constitutional civilian authority (Siddiq, 2007).

The 1958 coup by General Ayub Khan marked a significant turning point. Following the abrogation of the 1956 Constitution by President Iskander Mirza and the imposition of martial law, Ayub Khan swiftly deposed Mirza and established a centralized military regime. This consolidation of power reflected the military's claim to legitimacy through promises of stability and modernization amid chronic political dysfunction (Aziz, 2007). Ayub's introduction of the "Basic Democracies" system in 1960 institutionalized controlled political participation under a military framework, blurring the lines between civilian and military governance. In 1969, General Yahya Khan replaced Ayub Khan in Pakistan's first military-to-military transfer of power, underscoring the military's entrenched institutional autonomy. Yahya Khan's administration, while promising democratization through direct elections, failed to manage political pluralism, particularly with the Awami League's electoral victory in East Pakistan. The regime's refusal to transfer power and subsequent military crackdown led to the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 (Khan, 2017). This episode highlighted the military's limitations in political governance and its inability to accommodate federal democratic structures.

The 1977 coup by General Zia-ul-Haq ushered in a new phase of military rule, distinguished by ideological transformation through state-led Islamization. Zia's regime redefined the military's legitimacy, integrating religious narratives to justify authoritarian control. By embedding Islamic laws into Pakistan's legal and political systems, Zia expanded the military's sociopolitical influence and forged long-standing alliances with conservative religious elements (Nasir, 2004). His execution of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto further eliminated political opposition and exemplified the coercive tactics used to suppress civilian resistance (Bhutto, 1979). The 1999 military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf illustrated the evolution of military rule into a more refined and internationally palatable form. Unlike previous regimes, Musharraf sought to combine liberal economic reforms and selective democratization under the banner of "enlightened moderation." His tenure also demonstrated how the military capitalized on global geopolitical dynamics, particularly post-9/11 alignments, to maintain strategic relevance and international legitimacy (Kumar, 2012). Despite nominal civilian transitions post-2008, the military continues to exert decisive influence over national security, foreign policy and even domestic governance, often through indirect or hybrid mechanisms.

Throughout Pakistan's political history, the armed forces have emerged not only as institutional power-holders but also as key architects of state ideology and policy. The military's self-perception as the guardian of national integrity, coupled with weak civilian institutions, has facilitated repeated disruptions

of democratic continuity. Theoretical approaches such as praetorianism (Huntington, 1957) and hybrid regime theory provide analytical frameworks to understand the persistence of military dominance in Pakistan's political system. These concepts highlight how military establishments, while initially intervening under the pretext of crisis management, tend to institutionalize their power through formal and informal mechanisms that marginalize civilian authority. The Pakistani case presents a compelling illustration of civil-military imbalance, where the military institutionally and ideologically embeds itself within the state apparatus. This trajectory, when compared to other militarized polities such as Turkey, allows for a comparative examination of the structural, ideological and historical conditions that shape military engagement in political life.

The Guardians of Kemalism

The Turkish military has long perceived itself as the custodian of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularist legacy. Historically, the armed forces have intervened in the country's political landscape to safeguard the foundational principles of Kemalism particularly secularism, nationalism and modernization. The military's institutional autonomy and ideological commitment to Kemalist values have enabled it to justify periodic interventions in civilian politics as a form of "corrective" action rather than a usurpation of democratic authority.

Between 1960 and 1997, Turkey experienced a series of military interventions ranging from direct coups to indirect political manipulation -- each reinforcing the military's role as a dominant actor in shaping the political order. The 1960 coup marked the beginning of this interventionist tradition. On May 27, 1960, mid-ranking military officers overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, accusing him of undermining secularism and consolidating authoritarian power. The National Unity Committee, a 38-member junta, assumed control, initiating a process of political restructuring that included the execution of Menderes and two of his ministers. This coup not only institutionalized military guardianship over the republic's ideological foundations but also legitimized military involvement in governance under the guise of protecting democracy (Erickson, 2020).

The 1971 intervention introduced a more refined mechanism of influence. Instead of directly seizing power, the military issued a memorandum to Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, demanding his resignation amidst growing political polarization, economic decline and escalating violence between ideological factions. This "coup by memorandum" allowed the military to engineer regime change without suspending constitutional processes, installing a technocratic government that reflected the generals' vision of order and Kemalist reformism (Hippel, *Democracy By Force*, 2000). The 1980 coup represented the most comprehensive and repressive intervention. On September 12, 1980, the military, led by General Kenan Evren, assumed control amidst widespread political instability, economic collapse and sectarian violence. Unlike earlier interventions, this coup involved complete political suppression: the dissolution of parliament, banning of political parties, arrests of over 650,000 individuals and systemic human rights abuses. The military justified its actions as necessary to restore constitutional order and national unity (Cook, 2007).

In contrast, the 1997 "postmodern coup" exemplified the military's shift toward indirect, bureaucratic methods of intervention. Without martial law or a suspension of the constitution, the military pressured

Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party to resign through a series of coordinated institutional mechanisms. This included National Security Council briefings, judicial actions and public messaging campaigns. The intervention reflected a more nuanced understanding of political control through civilian instruments, setting precedents for securitized governance without overt martial force (Hale, 1994).

The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, marked a significant rupture in Turkish civil-military relations. Orchestrated by a faction within the armed forces allegedly aligned with the Gülen movement, the attempt aimed to depose President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, it was swiftly neutralized due to a lack of coordination, broad public resistance and loyalty among key military units and law enforcement. Erdoğan subsequently implemented wide-ranging purges across the military, judiciary and civil services, closing military academies and placing the armed forces firmly under civilian oversight. The failed coup was reconstituted into a national myth through annual commemorations, symbolizing a shift from military tutelage to civilian authoritarianism under Erdoğan's executive presidency (Ozbudun, 2006).

Over these successive interventions, the Turkish military has oscillated between direct rule and indirect influence, embodying what Huntington (1957) termed "praetorianism" where the military acts as an arbiter during periods of political instability. However, the trajectory since 2016 demonstrates a paradigm shift: the erosion of military autonomy and the consolidation of a dominant civilian executive. This historical evolution of civil-military dynamics in Turkey provides a critical point of comparison for analyzing similar patterns in Pakistan, where the military has also functioned as both ruler and kingmaker under the guise of preserving national stability and ideological integrity.

Pakistan's constitutional Framework and Military Influence

Pakistan's constitutional and legal architecture has historically provided both formal and informal avenues for military intervention in the political domain. The country's tumultuous constitutional trajectory comprising the promulgation of three constitutions (1956, 1962 and 1973) and multiple episodes of suspension or abrogation—attests to the persistent entanglement of the military with civilian governance structures. A particularly significant formal mechanism was the insertion of Article 58(2)(b) into the 1973 Constitution during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime in 1985. This provision authorized the president, often aligned with the military establishment, to unilaterally dissolve elected governments, thereby institutionalizing executive interference in democratic processes. Although repealed in 1997, the legacy of this article continues to influence judicial interpretations that often reflect a predisposition toward safeguarding military interests.

The establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) during General Pervez Musharraf's tenure further formalized the military's involvement in policy formulation. The NSC institutionalized a platform through which military leadership, particularly the Chief of Army Staff, could participate in key national security and governance decisions alongside civilian officials. Although the formal role of the NSC has since been reduced, the structure it introduced legitimized the military's enduring advisory—and frequently decisive role in Pakistan's security and foreign policy formulation (Stobdan, 2014). The judiciary has historically adopted a paradoxical stance in relation to military intervention, often providing constitutional validation to military regimes under the "doctrine of necessity." This legal principle was first invoked to

legitimize General Ayub Khan's 1958 coup and subsequently applied to justify General Zia's imposition of martial law in 1977 and General Musharraf's emergency measures in 2007. The recurrence of this doctrine has effectively entrenched military impunity and diminished the judiciary's capacity to act as a countervailing force. Contemporary judicial responses to constitutional petitions challenging military overreach frequently involve dismissal or procedural delay, underscoring an enduring deference to the armed forces.

In addition to constitutional mechanisms, statutory provisions such as the Army Act of 1952 provide military personnel with immunity from civilian judicial scrutiny, thereby ensuring institutional impunity in cases of human rights violations. Furthermore, contemporary legal instruments such as anti-terrorism and cybercrime legislation have been employed to suppress dissent, frequently criminalizing criticism of the military under charges of "sedition" or "cyber-terrorism." Economic enterprises controlled by the military, including the Fauji Foundation and the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), operate outside the purview of civilian oversight, affording the institution considerable financial autonomy and augmenting its influence in both state and society (Siddiq, 2007). Collectively, these constitutional, legal and institutional arrangements perpetuate a hybrid governance model in Pakistan, wherein democratic institutions operate within constraints implicitly or explicitly delineated by the military. The primacy accorded to national security often at the expense of civil liberties reinforces the military's role as the ultimate arbiter of political authority, even in periods of nominal civilian rule.

Turkey's legal Framework and Military

Turkey's constitutional and legal framework has historically institutionalized the political role of the military, embedding it as a central actor in safeguarding the secular character of the republic. The 1961 Constitution, promulgated following the country's first military coup, formally established the National Security Council (Millî Güvenlik Kurulu, MGK) as a constitutional entity. Through this body, senior military officials were empowered to advise civilian governments on matters of national security often exerting *de facto* authority over decision-making processes (Hale, 1994). This structural dominance was further entrenched by the 1982 Constitution, which was adopted under military auspices following the 1980 coup. The new constitutional order not only preserved the MGK's influence but also granted the armed forces significant autonomy over their internal affairs and institutionalized their role as the protectors of Kemalist secularism.

Article 35 of the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law exemplified the military's expansive mandate, vaguely tasking it with "protecting and safeguarding the Turkish homeland and the Republic." This provision effectively rendered military intervention a legally defensible "constitutional mission," thereby legitimizing coups within the framework of national guardianship. Furthermore, until the legal reforms of 2003, MGK decisions were binding on civilian authorities, enabling military commanders to exert control over policy domains such as education, internal security and counterterrorism. The military also enjoyed judicial autonomy through the establishment of military courts under the 1982 Constitution, which insulated its personnel from civilian legal oversight.

Reform efforts aligned with Turkey's bid for European Union membership (1999–2004) gradually curtailed this entrenched military dominance. These reforms reduced the MGK's authority, transformed its

decisions into non-binding recommendations and abolished many judicial privileges previously afforded to the armed forces. However, a decisive transformation occurred in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July 2016. The government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded by fundamentally restructuring the civil-military relationship. The constitutional shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017 effectively dismantled the last institutional vestiges of military autonomy. Under the new system, the Ministry of National Defense gained full authority over promotions and appointments within the military hierarchy, while the President was formally designated as the commander-in-chief signifying the complete subordination of the armed forces to civilian executive control (M, 2005).

Military and Politics in Pakistan

Pakistan's military has entrenched itself as a dominant force within the country's political system through a combination of historical legacies, ideological constructs and institutional mechanisms. Its prominence is rooted in the foundational trauma of the 1947 partition and the ensuing conflicts with India, particularly the wars of 1948, 1965 and 1971. These historical events enabled the military to cultivate and sustain a national narrative in which it is portrayed as the indispensable guardian of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The protracted dispute over Kashmir continues to serve as a perpetual rationale for military supremacy, allowing the institution to frame its dominance in terms of national security imperatives. Institutionally, the military exercises significant influence over Pakistan's defense and foreign policies, particularly in matters concerning India, Afghanistan and the national nuclear strategy. Even during periods of civilian rule, these domains remain effectively under military control, thereby ensuring the institution's centrality in governance. The structural weakness of civilian institutions exacerbated by recurring political instability, systemic corruption and administrative inefficiency has further facilitated military intervention in the political sphere. These failures have led to widespread public disillusionment with democratic processes, thereby enabling the military to position itself as a "necessary evil" and a comparatively more competent alternative to elected governments.

This perception is strategically cultivated by the military through its expansive economic footprint and media influence. The armed forces control vast economic assets, including real estate enterprises such as the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), industrial conglomerates like the Fauji Foundation and media organizations either directly or indirectly aligned with military narratives (Siddiq, 2007). These assets provide the military with the resources to maintain patronage networks, influence public discourse and enhance its institutional legitimacy. Moreover, the military has adeptly manipulated ideological divisions within society to reinforce its authority. By aligning with conservative religious groups, particularly during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–1988), the military intertwined its legitimacy with Islamic nationalism. This ideological alignment has enabled the military to justify its interventions as safeguards of both national security and religious identity. Simultaneously, it has systematically delegitimized progressive and ethno-nationalist movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and Baloch rights activists by branding them as "anti-state," thereby fragmenting dissent and stifling opposition (Group, 2008).

The control of media and information plays a central role in the military's strategy to shape public opinion. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) department directs national narratives, while coercive measures such as censorship, intimidation and enforced disappearances are employed to silence dissenting voices. Journalists and activists, including figures like Idrees Khattak and others, have faced abduction or have been compelled to issue public “apologies” on state-run media platforms. Additionally, the implementation of cybercrime laws and social media crackdowns further curtails freedom of expression and restricts spaces for critical engagement. Pakistan's military sustains its dominance through a cyclical pattern of crisis and intervention. It allows civilian administrations to falter under the weight of structural and political challenges, only to reassert itself as the savior of the state. This recurring dynamic ensures the military's enduring role as the principal arbiter of political outcomes in Pakistan. Unless comprehensive structural reforms are undertaken to recalibrate civil-military relations, empower democratic institutions and foster a robust political culture, the military is likely to retain its preeminent position in Pakistan's governance architecture.

Secularism vs Islam in Turkey

The Turkish military derived its political influence from deeply entrenched ideological, institutional and sociopolitical foundations that trace back to the republic's formative years. As the self-proclaimed guardian of Kemalist secularism, the armed forces assumed a central role in preserving the foundational principles articulated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The military positioned itself as the ultimate bulwark against perceived internal threats including Islamist movements, leftist ideologies and ethnic separatism thereby asserting its authority as the custodian of national unity and secular governance (Zaheer & Jabeen, 2016). This ideological positioning was institutionally reinforced through mechanisms such as the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu, MGK), which granted the military considerable autonomy and a formalized advisory role in state affairs. These constitutional provisions enabled the armed forces to exert political influence without necessitating direct governance. In contrast to Pakistan where the military has predominantly leveraged external security threats, particularly from India, to legitimize its political interventions the Turkish military often framed its interventions as responses to domestic instability. Events such as the violent confrontations between leftist and rightist factions during the 1970s, the Kurdish insurgency and the emergence of political Islam offered recurrent justifications for military coups.

The 1980 coup d'état stands as a pivotal example wherein the military capitalized on widespread societal disillusionment with political turmoil to impose a comprehensive restructuring of Turkey's political and legal framework. This intervention embedded military oversight into governance structures, institutionalizing its role in shaping political trajectories. The military's dominance was further facilitated by the tacit support of secular urban elites, including segments of the judiciary, academia and business community, who perceived the armed forces as protectors of secular modernity against the rise of conservative populism. This elite-military alliance contributed to the armed forces' ability to operate with relative impunity, exemplified by the so-called “postmodern coup” of 1997. In this instance, the military employed indirect methods such as media manipulation and economic pressure to destabilize and ultimately unseat an elected Islamist-led government, avoiding overt use of force (Kohn, 1997).

However, the political clout of the Turkish military has substantially declined in the 21st century, particularly under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Through a combination of strategic institutional reforms and political maneuvering, Erdoğan systematically dismantled the military's entrenched influence. Between 1999 and 2004, the Turkish government, under the pretext of aligning with European Union accession criteria, implemented legal and constitutional reforms aimed at curbing military autonomy. The failed coup attempt of July 2016 further catalyzed a comprehensive purge of military personnel and facilitated Erdoğan's consolidation of power through the establishment of an executive presidential system. These developments have effectively subordinated the armed forces to civilian control, reversing decades of military dominance (Cook, 2007). Despite the erosion of its formal political authority, the historical legacy of the Turkish military continues to shape contemporary debates on secularism, governance and civil-military relations. When compared with Pakistan, Turkey represents a distinctive trajectory where internal ideological commitments and state-building imperatives, rather than geopolitical insecurity, primarily shaped the military's political role. This contrast underscores the varied manifestations of military influence in differing political and institutional contexts.

Consequences of Military Intervention.

In Pakistan, military takeovers have engendered a cyclical pattern of political instability, wherein fragile civilian administrations are periodically deposed under the pretext of restoring democratic order, only to be succeeded by similarly weak governance structures. The 1958 coup led by General Ayub Khan inaugurated a centralized authoritarian regime, dismantling political pluralism and institutionalizing bureaucratic-military dominance. General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 intervention introduced a theocratic orientation by embedding Islamization within state institutions, thereby fostering religious radicalism and empowering extremist factions. General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup further debilitated democratic structures through the implementation of a "guided democracy," in which formal electoral processes were retained while substantive authority remained in the hands of the military (Shah, 2014).

Democratic organs such as the parliament, judiciary and political parties remain subordinated to military authority, undermining their autonomy and efficacy. Through institutions like the National Defence University and media operations under the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military has cultivated a nationalistic and securitized narrative, shaping societal perceptions of internal and external threats. The military's expansive economic enterprises exemplified by entities such as the Fauji Foundation and Defence Housing Authority (DHA) have distorted market dynamics, limited private sector competitiveness and diverted state resources for institutional gain. Patterns of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and suppression of dissent particularly targeting ethnic minorities and civil society actors persist under both direct military regimes and hybrid civilian-military arrangements. Critically, repeated military interventions have obstructed the development of a democratic political culture, trapping Pakistan in a paradox wherein the military is simultaneously perceived as the source of dysfunction and the instrument of stabilization (Siddiqi, 2007).

In contrast, the trajectory of military influence in Turkey, while sharing certain authoritarian parallels, reflects distinct ideological and institutional dynamics. Historically, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) positioned themselves as guardians of Kemalist secularism, intervening to preserve the foundational

ethos of the republic. The 1960 coup set a precedent for military oversight of civilian politics, while the 1980 intervention imposed a constitution prioritizing state security over civil liberties, thereby exacerbating ethnic tensions—particularly with the Kurdish population. The 1997 “postmodern coup,” characterized by indirect pressure on the Islamist Welfare Party, demonstrated the military’s aversion to religious political expression, ultimately propelling the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) (M, 2005).

Although justified as safeguards of democracy, these coups entrenched authoritarian practices and curtailed political pluralism, eventually facilitating Erdoğan’s consolidation of executive power. Military repression of Islamists and ethnic minorities deepened social cleavages, engendering populist reactions that fueled anti-establishment movements. Periodic interventions undermined investor confidence, contributing to economic volatility, as seen in the financial crisis following the 1997 intervention. The 1980 coup’s widespread use of torture and imprisonment inflicted deep and lasting trauma on civil society.

Particularly, the failed coup attempts in 2016 marked a decisive shift in civil-military relations in Turkey. The subsequent purges, dismantling of military courts and appointment of AKP loyalists have effectively neutralized the military’s political autonomy (Cook, 2007). This development, however, has not translated into democratic deepening. Instead, it has facilitated the emergence of a civilian autocracy, where Erdoğan’s centralized authority eclipses checks and balances. While the military remains involved in foreign policy ventures, such as operations in Syria and Libya, its role is now firmly subordinated to civilian command. The transformation is deeply polarizing: Islamist factions view it as a triumph over military tutelage, whereas secularists decry the erosion of Kemalist safeguards (Panico, 1999).

Contemporary Civil-Military Relations in Comparative Perspective

By the 2020s, Pakistan and Turkey exhibit contrasting paradigms of civil-military relations, shaped by their respective political trajectories. In Pakistan, the military continues to exert significant influence through hybrid governance models, positioning itself as the ultimate arbiter of national politics without exercising overt control. The military orchestrates regime changes—evidenced by its pivotal role in the ascent and subsequent removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018–2022)—and retains control over core state institutions, including the judiciary, media and foreign policy apparatus. Vast economic interests, insulating it from civilian accountability, reinforce its institutional autonomy. Nonetheless, increasing public dissent, especially among urban youth and marginalized ethnic movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, is gradually challenging the military’s hegemonic narrative (Siddiqi, 2007).

Conversely, in Turkey, the post-2016 era has witnessed the subjugation of the once-dominant military establishment under Erdoğan’s centralized civilian rule. The extensive purges of military personnel and institutional restructuring have dismantled the traditional guardianship role of the TAF. While this shift has ended military tutelage, it has coincided with significant democratic backsliding, revealing that the mere subordination of the military does not inherently produce liberal democratic governance. Rather, it has enabled an authoritarian civilian regime to flourish, with limited institutional checks on executive power.

The key distinction between the two cases lies in the nature of institutional control. Pakistan's military sustains indirect dominance through deeply embedded institutional mechanisms, whereas Turkey's military has been forcibly depoliticized and brought under one-party civilian rule. Both trajectories illustrate that neither military supremacy nor its wholesale marginalization ensures democratic consolidation. Instead, sustainable democracy necessitates robust, accountable institutions capable of upholding civilian supremacy while maintaining professional, apolitical armed forces (Finer, 1962).

Contemporary Dynamics

In contemporary Pakistan, the military continues to serve as the most dominant institution within the country's political framework, despite the absence of overt military rule. Since General Pervez Musharraf's coup in 1999, direct military interventions have ceased; however, the armed forces have maintained their significant influence through indirect mechanisms of control and manipulation. A notable instance of this influence was observed in the removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan in April 2022. Initially supported by the military establishment during his ascent to power in 2018, Khan eventually fell out of favor due to his independent foreign policy orientation and efforts to assert civilian supremacy over key national security issues. His subsequent ousting through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence—widely regarded as orchestrated by the military—highlighted the continued role of the armed forces as Pakistan's ultimate political arbiter (Shah, 2014).

As noted by (Rizvi, 2000), the military effectively delineates the permissible boundaries of political activity in Pakistan. Its influence is sustained through various avenues: it retains strategic control over national security and foreign policy, particularly in relation to India, Afghanistan and the United States; exercises expansive economic power through military-operated business conglomerates; and exerts influence over the judiciary and media to manipulate political narratives. Despite growing criticism, particularly from urban youth and through digital platforms, the military retains substantial legitimacy in rural areas and continues to present itself as the guardian of national stability.

Military Guardianship and Civilian Supremacy in Turkey

The political role of the Turkish military has undergone a significant transformation, particularly under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The failed coup attempt in July 2016 attributed to sympathizers of exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen within the armed forces prompted a comprehensive and unprecedented purge. Over 50,000 military personnel were dismissed, hundreds of officers were imprisoned and military education institutions were restructured. This radical reorganization effectively ended the Turkish military's long-standing role as the protector of Kemalist secularism and its self-assigned oversight over democratic institutions (Hale, 1994). Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), civilian supremacy over the military has been consolidated. Although the armed forces remain engaged in military operations across Syria, Iraq and Libya, these campaigns are now firmly directed by the civilian government in alignment with Erdoğan's strategic and ideological agenda. While the military's autonomy has been curtailed, some scholars argue that this transformation has coincided with the erosion of democratic checks and balances, as Erdoğan has significantly centralized power within the executive branch. Presently, the military leadership appears ideologically aligned with the AKP's conservative-Islamist worldview, marking a definitive departure from its historical secular orientation.

Key Comparative Observations

The Pakistani military's influence is more systematically embedded within state institutions, where it operates through established control mechanisms. In contrast, the Turkish military historically exercised influence based more on ideological legitimacy rooted in Kemalist secularism. Pakistan's military maintains a vast economic infrastructure through military-owned enterprises, granting it financial independence and reinforcing its institutional strength. The Turkish military, in contrast, lacked similar economic autonomy, making it more vulnerable to political purges. While democratic frameworks exist in both states, Pakistan's civilian governments often remain nominal actors, constrained by the military's overarching authority. Conversely, in Turkey, democratic periods have facilitated the rise of Islamist parties; however, this has coincided with increasing authoritarianism under Erdoğan. Notably, military interventions in Pakistan have tended to suppress civilian politics, while in Turkey, civilian consolidation has occurred at the expense of pluralism. Turkey's NATO membership imposed structural limitations on military overreach, compelling some degree of democratic accountability. In contrast, Pakistan's geopolitical utility particularly vis-à-vis the United States and China has allowed its military to leverage international patronage without similar constraints. Despite differing in methodology, both states demonstrate a shared strategic objective: the systematic neutralization of dissent to maintain military or executive dominance over political life.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Pakistan and Turkey reveals that while both militaries have historically intervened in politics Pakistan's armed forces as custodians of national security and Turkey's as guardians of secular Kemalism their long-term impacts differ. Pakistan's military retains indirect control through institutionalized influence over governance and foreign policy, perpetuating a cycle of hybrid democracy. In contrast, Turkey's military, once dominant, has been systematically subordinated under Erdoğan's authoritarian civilian rule, though at the cost of democratic freedoms. Both cases demonstrate that unchecked military involvement erodes democratic norms, yet the absence of military oversight in Turkey has not guaranteed liberal democracy, highlighting the need for balanced civil-military relations anchored in constitutionalism rather than coercion. Ultimately, sustainable democracy in both nations requires depoliticized militaries, stronger civilian institutions and societal consensus on the military's role in a modern state.

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