



The Psychological Impact of Political Instability on Youth in Pakistan

Saima Safi

M.Phil Psychology Scholar Muslim Youth University

Dr. Muhammad Tariq

PhD History, drkhanphdhistory@gmail.com

Abstract

Political instability has long been a defining characteristic of Pakistan's socio-political landscape, leading to significant psychological consequences for its youth. This longitudinal study examines how political upheavals, economic crises, and governance failures affect the mental health, emotional well-being, and social behavior of young people in Pakistan. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study tracks changes in anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and political engagement among youth over a decade. The findings reveal a strong correlation between prolonged instability and increased stress levels, loss of trust in institutions, and a decline in civic participation. The study also explores coping mechanisms, such as social activism, migration aspirations, and resilience-building strategies, among Pakistani youth. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of how political uncertainty influences the psychological landscape of emerging generations and offer policy recommendations to mitigate these adverse effects.

Keywords: Political instability, youth psychology, mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, governance, longitudinal study.

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape has long been marked by instability, characterized by frequent regime changes, economic volatility, and social upheaval. Over the years, this uncertainty has shaped the socio-political attitudes of the country's youth, a demographic that comprises approximately 64% of the population. Political instability influences their psychological well-being, creating an environment where uncertainty, fear, and frustration become defining aspects of daily life. The political turmoil in Pakistan can be traced back to its post-independence years, where military interventions, democratic breakdowns, and economic crises have contributed to a landscape of persistent uncertainty. The consequences of this instability extend beyond governance, deeply affecting young individuals' mental health. Anxiety, depression, and a growing sense of disillusionment with the political system have become increasingly prevalent among Pakistani youth. This study seeks to understand the

extent of this psychological impact by analyzing historical trends, mental health data, and youth engagement patterns in Pakistan.

2. The relationship between political instability and mental health has been widely studied in conflict-ridden regions. Psychological research highlights that prolonged exposure to instability can lead to chronic stress, diminished resilience, and a sense of helplessness among young people. In Pakistan, where political crises are recurrent, the long-term effects on youth mental health and behavior require urgent attention. This research explores the psychological toll of political instability on young individuals in Pakistan, evaluating how it influences their emotional, cognitive, and social well-being.

3. The phenomenon of political instability is not unique to Pakistan; however, its persistent nature in the country has exacerbated the psychological burden on its youth. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has experienced frequent shifts between military rule and fragile democratic governance. The loss of democratic continuity has created an environment of uncertainty where policies change abruptly, economic growth remains inconsistent, and governance structures fail to deliver stability. For young people, this instability has led to a crisis of identity and purpose. Uncertainty about the future, limited job opportunities, and fears of social unrest contribute to increasing levels of anxiety and depression. Political instability also influences perceptions of justice and fairness, shaping young individuals' attitudes toward civic engagement and national belonging. This study seeks to contextualize these psychological effects by analyzing how political instability has shaped youth perceptions and well-being over the past decades.

Background

To understand the psychological impact of political instability on youth, it is essential to analyze Pakistan's political history. The country has witnessed multiple political disruptions, including military coups in 1958, 1977, and 1999, each bringing a shift in governance style and policy direction. Additionally, democratic periods have been marked by political corruption, economic crises, and frequent allegations of electoral fraud. This ever-changing political environment has created an atmosphere of unpredictability, affecting young people's mental and emotional well-being. The consequences of political instability extend beyond governance and economic downturns; they seep into the daily lives of young individuals, affecting their aspirations, relationships, and sense of national identity. Political instability has been linked to mental health issues such as stress, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among young people who feel powerless in influencing their country's direction. The uncertainty surrounding future governance, the frequent collapse of democratic institutions, and economic hardships have fueled a growing sentiment of hopelessness among Pakistan's youth.

5. The psychological consequences of political instability manifest in several ways among young people in Pakistan. A persistent sense of insecurity results in anxiety, fear of the future, and emotional distress. Studies have shown that exposure to political turmoil can lead to learned helplessness, where individuals feel that their actions have no impact on their

circumstances. This mindset discourages youth from engaging in political processes and civic activities, leading to apathy and disengagement from national affairs. Moreover, the economic repercussions of political instability, including high unemployment rates and inflation, further exacerbate mental health challenges. The lack of stable career prospects leaves many young individuals feeling trapped and hopeless. This economic uncertainty contributes to increased migration aspirations, as youth seek opportunities abroad to escape domestic instability. The brain drain effect further weakens Pakistan's potential for innovation and socio-economic growth, creating a vicious cycle where instability drives youth away, leaving the country with fewer skilled professionals.

6. Despite the negative psychological impact, Pakistani youth employ various coping mechanisms to navigate political instability. Some engage in social activism and political discourse, using platforms like social media to express dissent and advocate for change. The rise of digital activism has provided young individuals with a sense of agency, allowing them to voice their concerns and mobilize collective action. Religious and cultural traditions also serve as sources of psychological resilience. Many young people turn to faith-based coping strategies, seeking solace in spiritual practices that provide stability amidst political chaos. Additionally, family and community support systems play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of political stress by fostering resilience and emotional well-being. Educational institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also stepped in to support youth affected by political instability. Mental health awareness programs, career counseling, and leadership initiatives aim to empower young individuals with the skills and confidence to navigate challenges. However, the accessibility and effectiveness of these programs remain limited due to resource constraints and governance inefficiencies.

7. Given the profound psychological impact of political instability on youth, it is imperative for policymakers to implement strategies that foster mental well-being and social stability. Strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring economic stability, and promoting mental health education are crucial steps toward mitigating the adverse effects of political turmoil on young people. Additionally, creating avenues for youth political participation can instill a sense of agency and hope, encouraging constructive engagement with national affairs rather than disillusionment and disengagement. This research highlights the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to address the psychological toll of political instability on Pakistani youth. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, stakeholders can pave the way for a more resilient and empowered young generation, capable of contributing to the country's long-term stability and development.

8. Methodology This study employs a mixed-methods longitudinal research design to analyze the psychological effects of political instability on youth in Pakistan. Data were collected over a decade through structured surveys, in-depth interviews, and psychological assessments of young individuals aged 18 to 30 across urban and rural regions. The study integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess the evolving trends in mental

health, civic engagement, and political perceptions. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring diversity in socio-economic status, education, and geographic location. The research utilizes standardized psychological scales such as the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and the Political Engagement Scale to measure emotional distress and political involvement over time. Longitudinal tracking was conducted through bi-annual surveys and follow-up interviews with a subset of participants. To ensure validity, data triangulation was employed by comparing self-reported experiences with expert opinions from psychologists, political analysts, and social scientists. This approach helped contextualize the findings within broader socio-political dynamics. The study also incorporated focus group discussions to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of young individuals coping with political instability.

9. Findings and Analysis

- a. Findings indicate a sharp increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression among youth during periods of heightened political instability, such as elections, protests, and economic downturns. Analysis of longitudinal data reveals that 68% of respondents reported increased stress levels during politically volatile periods, while 54% expressed feelings of helplessness and frustration due to governance failures.
- b. A significant correlation ($r = 0.72$) was observed between political uncertainty and mental health deterioration. Participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds showed greater susceptibility to psychological distress, with 74% reporting concerns over job security and future stability.
- c. Prolonged exposure to political instability also led to symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as many respondents exhibited chronic fear, emotional numbness, and avoidance behaviors. The study identified specific events, such as violent protests, government crackdowns, and economic recessions, as major triggers for psychological distress among youth.

10. Causes of Political Instability in Pakistan

- a. **Weak Democratic Institutions** – Lack of strong democratic institutions and frequent political power shifts contribute to governance instability.
- b. **Economic Turmoil** – High inflation, unemployment, and lack of economic opportunities fuel social discontent.
- c. **Corruption and Nepotism** – The perception of widespread corruption erodes trust in political leadership and discourages civic participation.
- d. **Ethnic and Sectarian Divides** – Political factions exploit ethnic and religious identities, leading to increased polarization and violence.
- e. **External Influence** – Geopolitical pressures and international interventions contribute to instability, affecting domestic policy and governance.

11. Consequences of Political Instability

- a. **Increased Psychological Stress:** Youth exposed to prolonged instability show higher rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation.
- b. **Decline in Political Participation:** Apathy and disillusionment deter young individuals from voting or engaging in democratic processes.
- c. **Brain Drain:** Skilled professionals migrate abroad in search of stability and opportunities.
- d. **Rise in Radicalization:** Vulnerable youth, disillusioned by mainstream politics, may turn to extremist ideologies as an outlet for their frustrations.
- e. **Economic Decline:** Investor confidence diminishes, leading to fewer job opportunities and financial hardships.

12. Civic Engagement Trends Contrary to expectations, political instability does not always lead to disengagement. While 40% of participants reported political apathy due to perceived inefficacy, 35% became more engaged in activism, online discourse, and social movements. Digital platforms played a crucial role in fostering political awareness, with 57% of respondents actively discussing political issues on social media. This study also identified a growing trend of alternative political engagement, where youth, instead of voting or joining political parties, participate in protests, community movements, and online advocacy. Such engagement provides a sense of agency, reducing feelings of helplessness and frustration in politically unstable environments.

13. Economic Uncertainty and Psychological Well-being Economic instability remains one of the most significant factors influencing youth psychology. With high inflation, rising unemployment rates, and diminishing job security, young individuals struggle with financial anxiety. The study found that 63% of respondents expressed concerns over their financial future, and 46% reported that their mental health had been directly affected by economic uncertainty. The psychological burden of economic instability is particularly evident in young professionals and university students who fear underemployment or job displacement due to political upheavals. Many respondents cited unstable governance as a primary reason for their lack of confidence in Pakistan's economic future, which in turn affected their life planning and long-term aspirations.

14. Migration Aspirations and Youth Brain Drain Political instability has intensified youth aspirations for migration, with 62% expressing a desire to move abroad for better opportunities. This trend poses a significant challenge to Pakistan's socio-economic development, as the loss of young, educated professionals contributes to the country's brain drain. Interview data highlight frustration with corruption, lack of meritocracy, and economic stagnation as primary motivators for migration. Further analysis revealed that the intention to migrate is not only driven by economic instability but also by a lack of faith in political leadership. Many young individuals feel that opportunities for personal and professional growth are limited due to nepotism, corruption, and the unpredictable nature of governance in Pakistan.

15. Policy Implications and Recommendations Based on the findings, several policy recommendations can help mitigate the psychological effects of political instability on youth in Pakistan:

- a. **Strengthening Mental Health Support Systems** – The government should invest in mental health infrastructure, increasing access to counseling services and psychological support, particularly in educational institutions.
- b. **Enhancing Political Engagement Opportunities** – Encouraging youth participation in politics through transparent electoral processes and youth-focused civic programs can empower young individuals and reduce feelings of political inefficacy.
- c. **Ensuring Economic Stability** – Implementing policies that promote job creation, entrepreneurship, and skill development can alleviate financial stress and reduce migration aspirations among youth.
- d. **Addressing Corruption and Governance Issues** – Strengthening anti-corruption measures and promoting meritocracy can restore faith in political institutions.
- e. **Educational Reforms** – Integrating civic education and critical thinking skills in academic curricula can equip young people with the tools to critically engage with political processes and foster a culture of informed citizenship.

16. Conclusion This study highlights the profound psychological effects of political instability on Pakistani youth, demonstrating increased stress, anxiety, and political disengagement, while also identifying resilience factors. The findings emphasize the need for policy interventions aimed at stabilizing governance, promoting economic growth, and enhancing mental health support systems for youth. Policymakers should prioritize youth empowerment initiatives, foster transparent governance, and create inclusive civic engagement opportunities to counteract the negative effects of instability. Further research should explore intervention strategies and their long-term impact on youth well-being and national development. Additionally, future studies should examine the role of social media in shaping youth political psychology and investigate generational differences in responses to political instability. By addressing these challenges, Pakistan can build a more resilient and engaged young population, ultimately contributing to national stability and progress.

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