

Critical Reasoning Practice

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A silent democratic backlash in South Asia

The recent developments in Bangladesh, and the earlier events in Sri Lanka and Pakistan as well as the recent electoral outcome of the general election in India, clearly suggest a silent democratic backlash in South Asia. While there have been different historical trajectories in postcolonial democracies, we will make sense of this backlash by comparing the Indian case with that of Pakistan.

Comparisons of the Indian and Pakistani political systems in the post-colonial years have concentrated primarily on reasons why democracy endured in India while Pakistan transgressed into authoritarianism, despite both having a similar colonial legacy. Many scholars have detailed the reasons contributing to democracy in India compared to Pakistan. These range from the presence of a mass-based political party system in India versus an organisationally weak Muslim League to the dominance of particular social classes constituting the Congress (middle classes) and the Muslim League (the landed aristocracy).

While the value of such works is evident and advances our understanding of the political trajectories of India and Pakistan, the traditional comparison has undermined attempts at understanding the democratic space in Pakistan in the same vein that it has obfuscated analysis of an authoritarian tendency in the Indian political system despite its democratic credentials. We expand on what we understand and imply by this particular reasoning and argue that India and Pakistan are in the midst of a silent democratic backlash, where social forces are seeking to reclaim democratic space.

Accountable democracy to an overreach?

India was typified as a case of exceptionalism with a functional democracy, a history of free and fair elections and the well-accepted operative idea of the separation of powers. Barring the aberration of the imposition of the Emergency in 1975, India remained an accountable democracy. Constitutional vision and the anti-colonial legacy did well in the Indian case to maintain the dominance of civil rule over military rule. Krishna Menon, who served as the Defence Minister (1957-62) in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet, played his part in undermining the armed forces, whether out of a larger vision of maintaining the supremacy of civilian rule or merely out of being 'meanest and pettiest' towards his generals, as



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The political trajectories of India and Pakistan apart, social forces are seeking to reclaim their democratic space

Jairam Ramesh notes in his recent biography of Krishna Menon. India never faced the threat of military dictatorship.

However, the rise of Narendra Modi in 2014 changed all that. India played the catch-up game in moving briskly towards an authoritarian model of governance based on executive overreach. It was, perhaps, for the first time that the Indian democratic exercise not only took a presidential form but also campaigned for an Opposition-free democracy with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s campaign for a 'Congress-mukt Bharat'. The current dispensation has been politicising issues related to security and the armed forces.

Universities in India are sought to be converted into havens of religiosity and symbolism of armed forces to counter the democratic protest politics of students and youth.

In Pakistan

Pakistan, on the other hand, started out as a lost cause with the bureaucracy and the military pulverising the political process and steering it in the direction of authoritarianism. Despite the deep-seated authoritarianism at the elite level, all military dictatorships, from 1958, saw their demise through large-scale protests underlying the distaste of the masses with military rule. In one case, mass protests ushered in Pakistan's first general election, the onset of military oppression in its eastern wing and the disintegration of the state in 1971 – the exact opposite of what the military intended. The intention to control and dominate the political system collapsed again under the weight of a lawyers' movement and a public loss of legitimacy as General Musharraf's rule alienated the masses and the political elites alike. Since 2008, Pakistan has had four general elections and a relative transitioning to democracy, however, typified by a strong push-back against this transition by the military. During this time, Pakistan's politics has witnessed a political elite consensus to continue on the democratic path (as witnessed in the Charter of Democracy and also the 18th Amendment). But the last two elections (2018 and 2024) signify a worrying trend on the part of the political elites to seek consensus with the military to not only outbid but, more importantly, decimate and wipe out political opponents.

The result, however, for the political elites undertaking tactical alliances with the military for political survival and the military itself has been the contrary. What Pakistan has witnessed

since 2008 is a further deepening and widening of the citizenry's advocacy for democracy, and a developing contradiction between the political class and military over who has the right to rule. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government and the military embarked on a 'one-page' mantra only to see the Pakistan Muslim League (N), or the PML-N, taking out public rallies criticising the government, but, more crucially, the military for its political engineering.

After the successful vote of no-confidence against its government, the PTI filled the PML-N's shoes by targeting the military for its dismissal which deeply resonated with the public. The result: the PTI emerged as the largest vote-getter and political party in Parliament in the general election despite the entire state machinery working to the contrary. What one learns is that an alliance with the military provides political elites a short-term route to power but only at increased reputational costs as a more politically and socially aware citizenry questions this alliance as well as the military's political engineering.

The general election in India witnessed a democratic push-back against the BJP's authoritarian politics. In Pakistan, the military-party nexus has come under the scanner with public protests and the legitimacy of the elections being questioned by the public. Though, one must hasten to add that in India, the middle classes yearned for dictatorship during certain historical moments such as the Emergency in 1975. They have felt that dictatorship would be more efficient in managing India's diversity and the social chaos that comes with it. Historically, the Pakistani middle class has also displayed a conservative political attitude favouring military rule as opposed to a chaotic democratic politics. A younger generation though has become increasingly critical of the military's ingress in politics.

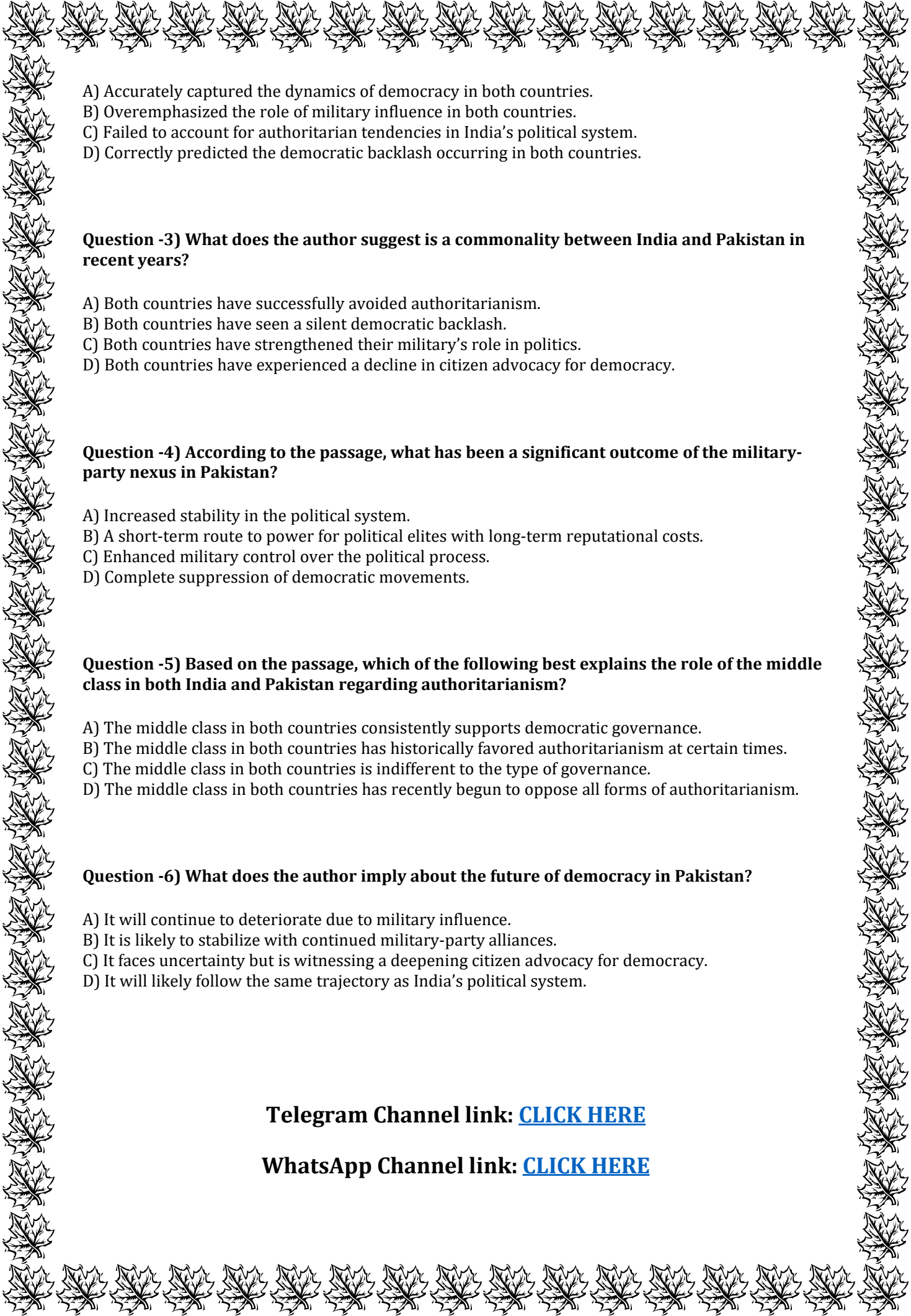
In perspective

A comparative analysis of the Indian and Pakistani historical experience tells us that as democracies are experiencing backsliding there are newer methods being devised by the citizenry, including the use of digitalised spaces, to produce a democratic backlash. In both India and Pakistan, they have spoken through electoral outcomes leading to a stable political transition in India. One has to watch what form it will take in Pakistan.

Question -1) Which of the following best describes the author's view on the Indian political system after 2014?

- A) India has become more democratic with increased citizen participation.
- B) India has shifted towards a more authoritarian model of governance.
- C) India has maintained its tradition of free and fair elections.
- D) India's political system has remained largely unchanged since its independence.

Question -2) The passage implies that the traditional comparison between India and Pakistan's political systems has:

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- A) Accurately captured the dynamics of democracy in both countries.
 - B) Overemphasized the role of military influence in both countries.
 - C) Failed to account for authoritarian tendencies in India's political system.
 - D) Correctly predicted the democratic backlash occurring in both countries.

Question -3) What does the author suggest is a commonality between India and Pakistan in recent years?

- A) Both countries have successfully avoided authoritarianism.
- B) Both countries have seen a silent democratic backlash.
- C) Both countries have strengthened their military's role in politics.
- D) Both countries have experienced a decline in citizen advocacy for democracy.

Question -4) According to the passage, what has been a significant outcome of the military-party nexus in Pakistan?

- A) Increased stability in the political system.
- B) A short-term route to power for political elites with long-term reputational costs.
- C) Enhanced military control over the political process.
- D) Complete suppression of democratic movements.

Question -5) Based on the passage, which of the following best explains the role of the middle class in both India and Pakistan regarding authoritarianism?

- A) The middle class in both countries consistently supports democratic governance.
- B) The middle class in both countries has historically favored authoritarianism at certain times.
- C) The middle class in both countries is indifferent to the type of governance.
- D) The middle class in both countries has recently begun to oppose all forms of authoritarianism.

Question -6) What does the author imply about the future of democracy in Pakistan?

- A) It will continue to deteriorate due to military influence.
- B) It is likely to stabilize with continued military-party alliances.
- C) It faces uncertainty but is witnessing a deepening citizen advocacy for democracy.
- D) It will likely follow the same trajectory as India's political system.

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