THE RISE OF IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN PAKISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTORAL POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

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Abstract
The growing intensity of ideological polarization has emerged as one of the most defining features of Pakistan's contemporary political landscape, reshaping electoral behavior, party competition, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy. This qualitative study explores how ideological divisions—rooted in religion, nationalism, class, and party identity—are influencing political participation and simultaneously challenging democratic stability in Pakistan. Using a phenomenological research design, the study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with political activists, youth voters, journalists, and local community leaders across diverse socio-political settings. The thematic analysis reveals that polarization in Pakistan is no longer limited to party loyalties; it now reflects deeply ingrained identity-based worldviews, amplified by digital media echo chambers and emotionally charged political rhetoric. Participants consistently reported that political discussions have become increasingly confrontational, fostering mistrust between groups and reducing the space for dialogue, compromise, and reasoned debate. Findings also show that ideological polarization shapes voting decisions by reinforcing rigid in-group biases, driving symbolic politics over policy-based choices, and escalating support for populist narratives. Moreover, respondents expressed concerns that extreme polarization undermines institutional credibility, weakens social cohesion, and intensifies the potential for democratic backsliding. While polarization energizes political engagement for some, it simultaneously diminishes pluralism and discourages dissent. The study concludes that ideological polarization poses a significant risk to Pakistan's democratic stability, calling for renewed civic education, media literacy, and cross-party dialogue mechanisms. The research provides a nuanced understanding of polarization's socio-political consequences and offers a foundation for future studies examining its long-term implications for Pakistan's political development.
Keywords: *Electoral, Politics, Ideology, Democracy, Stability, Polarization*

Introduction

Political polarization has become a defining challenge for democratic society's worldwide, reshaping political participation, civic engagement, and institutional trust (Aroyehun, 2024). While polarization has been widely examined in Western democracies, emerging research suggests that similar and sometimes more intense patterns are taking root in developing political systems, particularly in South Asia. Pakistan represents a critical case in this global debate, as its political environment has undergone a sharp ideological divide over the past decade, driven by

populist mobilization, growing party competition, and the rapid expansion of digital media ecosystems (Akram et al., 2022, 2021; Jalalzai et al., 2025; Shabbir et al., 2024). These ideological cleavages are transforming how citizens perceive political leaders, interpret national events, and engage with democratic processes.

In Pakistan, ideological polarization is increasingly visible in party-aligned narratives that frame political opponents as existential threats rather than competitors within a pluralistic democratic system (Riaz, 2023). Scholars argue that this "affective polarization"—the deepening hostility between opposing political groups—has intensified due to personalized political leadership, populist rhetoric, and the politicization of national identity. The political discourse across media platforms has become emotionally charged, fostering suspicion, intolerance, and an erosion of trust in democratic institutions such as Parliament, the judiciary, and electoral bodies. As a result, political disagreements increasingly escalate into moral and ideological confrontations (Ramzan & Khan, 2019), narrowing the space for dialogue and compromise (Moody-Adams, 2018).

The rise of digital media has further accelerated ideological divisions (Ma et al., 2024, 2025. Studies reveal that social media platforms in Pakistan amplify partisan messaging (Chen & Ramzan, 2024; Sohail & Akram, 2025), create echo chambers, and reinforce group-based political identities (Sultana et al., 2024). These online spaces often privilege sensational content, political misinformation, and identity-driven narratives, making polarization more pervasive and emotionally intense. Consequently, political discussions among citizens—both online and offline—have become confrontational, contributing to a decline in political tolerance and weakening social cohesion.

Electoral politics in Pakistan have been directly shaped by this ideological fragmentation (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021). Rather than voting based on policy preferences or governance performance, many citizens increasingly rely on ideological alignments grounded in religion, nationalism, and populist charisma (Riaz, 2023). This shift toward identity-based voting strengthens in-group loyalty but simultaneously deepens resentment toward opposing groups, thereby reducing the possibility of broad-based policy dialogue and cross-party cooperation. Political parties often mobilize voters through divisive narratives, framing political competition as a struggle between virtue and corruption, authenticity and betrayal, or patriots and traitors (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021, 2023). Such discursive strategies reinforce polarization and distort democratic deliberation.

Scholars warn that intense ideological polarization threatens democratic stability by delegitimizing political institutions, destabilizing electoral processes, and undermining consensus-building mechanisms necessary for democratic governance. In Pakistan's context—where institutional fragility, civil-military tensions, and socio-economic inequalities persist—polarization magnifies existing vulnerabilities and increases the risk of democratic backsliding (Shafqat, 2022; Yousaf & Zia, 2020). Although polarization can energize political participation and strengthen civic activism, its aggressive, exclusionary, and identity-bound form in Pakistan raises concerns for the future of democratic pluralism.

Given these dynamics, there is a pressing need to understand how ideological polarization manifests at the everyday experiential level. While empirical scholarship on Pakistan acknowledges polarization as a rising concern, few qualitative studies explore how political actors, voters, journalists, and community leaders personally experience and interpret these ideological divides. This study aims to addresses this gap by examining how polarization influences political engagement, interpersonal communication, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy among diverse stakeholders. In doing so, it provides a nuanced understanding of the

complex socio-political implications of polarization and contributes to ongoing debates surrounding the challenges facing Pakistan's democratic development.

Literature Review

Ideological polarization refers to the widening divide between political groups in terms of values, beliefs, and issue positions (Vegetti, 2019). In recent political scholarship, polarization is understood not only as a disagreement over issues but as a deep emotional and social distancing between opposing groups, commonly referred to as *affective polarization* (Prinz, 2021). While political disagreements are intrinsic to democratic plurality, research shows that polarization becomes harmful when it generates hostility, delegitimization, and intolerance (White, 2024). Global studies indicate that polarization is intensifying in many democracies due to media fragmentation, identity politics, and populist narratives. These trends are particularly significant in the Global South where political institutions are often fragile and more susceptible to manipulation (Matlosa, 2023).South Asian states exhibit high susceptibility to ideological polarization due to intertwined religious, ethnic, and national identities (Mostofa ET AL., 2024). In India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, studies show that social media has amplified antagonistic identity politics, leading to mass mobilization around religious and nationalist imaginaries (Shinohara, 2024). Scholars argue that polarization in the region often emerges in conjunction with populist movements, weakening democratic deliberation and increasing authoritarian tendencies. Pakistan shares these regional patterns but presents a more complex political environment due to repeated cycles of democratic instability; military influence, and volatile party competition (Ismial et al., 2025). Research identifies three main drivers of polarization within Pakistan's contemporary politics:

Populist rhetoric framing politics as a struggle between "corrupt elites" and the "righteous people" has intensified ideological divides. Such rhetoric personalizes conflicts, reducing political opponents to moral enemies. Political ideologies in Pakistan are closely linked to religion, nationalism, and class-based identities. Parties often mobilize these identities, transforming electoral competition into symbolic ideological conflicts (Waseem, 2022). Social media is perhaps the strongest driver of ideological polarization in Pakistan. Research shows that online platforms strengthen echo chambers, amplify misinformation, and reward emotionally charged partisan content. The rapid spread of unverified political narratives increases suspicion and hostility between opposing groups (Greenhill, & Oppenheim, 2017).

Ideological polarization strongly influences electoral behavior. According to recent scholarship, voters in polarized societies rely less on policy-based evaluation and more on identity-based loyalty. In Pakistan, polarization has decreased trust in political institutions including the Election Commission, Parliament, and judiciary (Hanif et al., 2024).Scholars globally warn that severe ideological polarization can lead to democratic erosion by obstructing consensus-building and encouraging authoritarian responses.

Significance of the Study

Ideological polarization has become one of the most influential and destabilizing forces in contemporary political systems worldwide, yet its manifestations in Pakistan remain critically underexplored. This study is significant because it provides an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of how polarization is experienced, interpreted, and acted upon by individuals embedded within Pakistan's dynamic sociopolitical environment. At a time when public discourse has become increasingly confrontational, political institutions face widespread mistrust, and electoral processes are contested, a deeper understanding of polarization is essential for diagnosing risks to democratic stability. The study contributes to political science, democracy

studies, and South Asian scholarship by offering empirical insight into affective, ideological, and identity-driven divisions that shape political behavior. Its qualitative approach captures nuanced experiences that cannot be revealed through survey-based research alone, offering a human-centered account of how polarization impacts civic engagement, social cohesion, and trust in governance. Furthermore, the findings carry practical significance for policymakers, election officials, civil society organizations, and educators attempting to mitigate polarization through civic education, media literacy, and inclusive dialogue platforms. By mapping the lived realities of political polarization, this study provides a foundation for reforms that can strengthen democratic resilience in Pakistan.

Rationale of the Study

There is an urgent need to investigate ideological polarization in Pakistan because existing research primarily focuses on institutional failures, elite politics, or electoral irregularities, while the social and psychological dimensions of political division remain understudied. Though global scholarship identifies polarization as a major factor contributing to democratic backsliding, this relationship has not been thoroughly examined in the Pakistani context, where democracy is historically fragile and repeatedly disrupted by authoritarian interventions. The rise of populist rhetoric, intensified media partisanship, and the widespread use of social media platforms have transformed political engagement into emotionally charged identity-based conflict. Yet, few studies analyze how citizens themselves interpret these shifts, how they experience conflict in everyday interactions, and how their political choices are shaped by ideological divides. Pakistan's youthful population—which is highly active online and increasingly politically expressive—adds another layer of complexity that warrants focused investigation.

This study's rationale therefore emerges from three academic and practical gaps: (1) the lack of qualitative, phenomenological research capturing citizens' lived experiences of polarization;(2) the insufficient analysis of how identity, digital media, and populist narratives interact to shape political behavior; and (3) the absence of grounded research exploring how polarization threatens democratic values such as pluralism, compromise, and institutional trust. By addressing these gaps, the study advances scholarly understanding and offers timely insights into Pakistan's evolving political landscape.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan is witnessing a rapid escalation of ideological polarization that is reshaping its electoral politics and threatening its democratic stability. Political differences, once rooted in policy preferences and party platforms, have evolved into hardened ideological divisions embedded in religious, nationalistic, and class-based identities. As a result, political discussions have become increasingly confrontational, eroding social cohesion and deepening mistrust between opposing groups. Digital media platforms intensify these divides by circulating partisan narratives and reinforcing echo chambers, while populist leaders capitalize on emotional rhetoric that frames politics as a moral struggle between "us" and "them." Despite these developments, there is limited empirical research exploring how ordinary citizens experience and interpret this polarization in their daily lives.The problem this study addresses is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how ideological polarization influences electoral decision-making, political engagement, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy in Pakistan. Without such understanding, policymakers and democratic institutions remain ill-equipped to address the rising hostility, declining institutional trust, and diminishing tolerance for dissent that characterize the country's political climate. This gap in knowledge is particularly concerning given Pakistan's history of democratic instability and its reliance on pluralistic political participation for democratic

consolidation. Therefore, the central problem is not merely that polarization exists, but that its societal manifestations, psychological impacts, and implications for democratic stability remain critically under-investigated.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how ideological polarization is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by individuals within Pakistan's contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Phenomenology was selected because the central aim of the research was not to measure polarization in numerical terms but to understand the *lived experiences*, emotions, and subjective meanings people attach to political division. This approach aligns with Dodgson (2017) emphasis on phenomenology as a method for uncovering the essence of shared experiences among individuals (Neubauer, et al.,2019) who have directly encountered a phenomenon of interest. In the context of Pakistan, where polarization manifests through personal relationships, social environments, and civic engagement, the phenomenological approach allowed for deep exploration of how individuals perceive and make sense of ideological conflict in their everyday lives.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across multiple urban and semi-urban regions of Pakistan to capture diverse sociopolitical perspectives. Participants included political activists, youth voters, journalists, civil society members, educators, and local community leaders. These groups were intentionally selected because they are frequently exposed to political debate, digital political content, and electoral processes, making them well-positioned to articulate the nuances of ideological polarization.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify individuals with firsthand experiences and informed viewpoints concerning political discourse and electoral participation. Twelve initial participants were recruited through academic networks, civil society organizations, and community contacts. Additional participants were identified through snowball sampling, resulting in a final sample of 24 participants, each offering a unique perspective shaped by their socio-economic background, political exposure, and media consumption patterns. Diversity in age, gender, political affiliation, and geographical background was ensured to avoid homogeneity and enrich the depth of insights.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences while offering the researcher flexibility to probe deeper into emerging ideas. The semi-structured format also ensured that essential themes related to polarization—identity, political discourse, media influence, electoral behavior, and perceptions of democracy—were consistently addressed.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (English, Urdu, or a mix), lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken throughout the interview process to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and initial analytic reflections. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and all identifying details were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework to interpret the data systematically. The process began with multiple readings of the

interview transcripts to achieve immersion in the narratives. Initial codes were then generated to capture significant phrases, sentiments, and ideas related to political identity, emotional responses, media experience, interpersonal conflict, and democratic concerns.

Codes were subsequently collated into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across participants' accounts. These themes included:

(1) *Polarization as Identity-Based Conflict,*
(2) *Digital Media as an Amplifier,*
(3) *Erosion of Dialogue and Compromise,*
(4) *Symbolic Electoral Behavior,* and
(5) *Threats to Democratic Stability.*

Themes were continuously refined by examining their internal coherence and distinctiveness. NVivo qualitative analysis software assisted in organizing data, linking codes, and maintaining an audit trail. The final themes reflect the collective essence of participants' lived experiences while preserving individual narrative depth.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher adopted a reflexive stance throughout the study, acknowledging the potential influence of their own academic background and sociopolitical awareness. Reflexive memos were maintained to critically examine pre-existing assumptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived realities rather than researcher bias.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, the study incorporated several measures:

Credibility

Member checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

Transferability

Rich contextual descriptions and detailed participant narratives allow readers to determine the applicability of findings to other sociopolitical contexts.

Dependability

An audit trail documenting all methodological decisions—including coding structures, theme development, and iterative revisions—ensured transparency.

Confirmability

Triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across different participant categories (activists, journalists, youth, community leaders), limiting the influence of individual bias.

Results

The thematic analysis of 24 in-depth interviews reveals five major themes that capture how ideological polarization is experienced, interpreted, and enacted in Pakistan's contemporary political environment. These themes reflect a consistent pattern of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses among participants and illuminate how polarization shapes electoral behavior and perceptions of democratic stability.

Theme 1: Polarization as Identity-Based Conflict

Participants overwhelmingly described polarization not merely as a difference in political preference but as a deeply identity-driven conflict rooted in religion, nationalism, regionalism, and party affiliation. For many, political identity has become intertwined with personal worth and social belonging, making political disagreement feel like a personal attack. Several respondents emphasized that political allegiances now function as "identity markers"

determining who belongs to which social group. A university student noted that *"politics has become a way of defining who you are — not just what you think."* Another participant shared that political identity is often inherited within families, strengthening in-group loyalty while demonizing out-groups.

Many also reported that ideological camps—particularly those aligned with dominant political parties—frame themselves as morally superior, which intensifies divisions. This identity-based polarization transforms ordinary political debates into moralistic conflicts, removing the possibility of neutral ground or compromise.

Theme 2: Digital Media as an Amplifier of Polarization

Participants unanimously identified digital media, especially Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), as the most influential catalyst in escalating ideological divisions. Social media spaces were described as emotionally charged, algorithm-driven echo chambers that reward sensationalism and punish nuance.Younger participants frequently mentioned exposure to politically motivated influencers who frame politics in binary, us-versus-them narratives. One respondent shared: *"The more dramatic the content, the more it spreads — and that's what shapes opinions today."*Journalists and activists highlighted concerns about misinformation and propaganda campaigns, noting that online political debates have become more hostile than face-to-face interactions. Many interviewees argued that digital platforms normalize aggression, sarcasm, character assassination, and oversimplified political judgments.As a result, social media is not only shaping political opinions but also reshaping interpersonal relationships. Several participants admitted unfollowing or blocking relatives and friends due to political disagreements online, illustrating how digital spaces migrate into real-world social fragmentation.

Theme 3: Erosion of Dialogue, Compromise, and Civic Reasoning

The interviews consistently revealed that ideological polarization severely undermines constructive political dialogue. Many participants expressed strong discomfort engaging in political conversations because such discussions quickly escalate into confrontation or ridicule, especially across party lines. Participants frequently described an environment where people "listen to reply, not to understand." Political debates are seen as zero-sum contests rather than opportunities for collective problem-solving. This erosion of political dialogue was perceived as a major obstacle to democratic functioning. A civil society member explained, *"We have lost the skill of listening... we don't debate issues, we attack people."* Several respondents recalled heated conflicts in workplaces, universities, and family gatherings that ended relationships rather than building understanding. The absence of compromise—an essential democratic value—was echoed across interviews. Many believed that political leaders model uncompromising behavior, which filters down to the public. Consequently, democratic norms such as tolerance, pluralism, and mutual respect appear increasingly fragile.

Theme 4: Symbolic Electoral Behavior Over Policy-Based Voting

The findings reveal that ideological polarization strongly influences electoral choices, with voters prioritizing symbolic political identities over concrete policy issues. Participants frequently admitted that they vote based on emotional attachment to political personalities, narratives of victimhood, or ideological loyalty rather than assessing candidates' performance or policy agendas. One participant shared: *"People are voting for what the party symbolizes to them, not what it delivers."* Youth voters in particular expressed deep admiration for leaders who project authenticity, defiance, or religious-nationalist ideals, even when tangible governance outcomes were unclear. This symbolic voting pattern is intensified by political parties' ability to craft compelling narratives of martyrdom, anti-corruption, or religious duty. Several participants

criticized the electorate's "emotional maturity," suggesting that polarization simplifies politics into moral binaries rather than complex policy discussions. This shift from rational choice to symbolic politics was viewed as a key destabilizing force, as it enables populist appeals and reduces voters' ability to hold leaders accountable for governance failures.

Theme 5: Threats to Democratic Stability and Institutional Trust

The final theme highlights the broader implications of ideological polarization for democratic institutions, governance, and national stability. Participants voiced strong concerns that polarization erodes trust in electoral processes, judiciary, media, and parliament.

Many interviewees believe that political leaders intentionally weaponize polarization to delegitimize institutions when outcomes do not favor their interests. This has led to widespread cynicism toward democratic procedures, including electoral integrity and judicial neutrality. Participants frequently described Pakistan's democracy as "fragile," "stagnant," or "under threat." Several argued that polarization increases susceptibility to authoritarian tendencies, as citizens become more willing to support strong leaders who promise order—even at the cost of democratic freedoms. Civil society members emphasized that democratic backsliding becomes more likely when citizens lose faith in institutions and seek quick, emotionally satisfying solutions to political conflict. Despite these challenges, a minority of participants noted that polarization also energizes political participation by drawing apathetic individuals into political discourse. However, they agreed that this heightened engagement is often driven by anger or resentment rather than constructive civic responsibility.

Summary of Findings

Collectively, the findings reveal that ideological polarization in Pakistan is:

- deeply identity-based,
- intensified by digital media ecosystems,
- detrimental to social cohesion and political dialogue,
- shaping electoral behavior through emotional and symbolic appeals, and
- weakening democratic institutions and stability.

These themes capture the lived experiences of citizens navigating Pakistan's polarized political environment and reveal how polarization influences both social relationships and national democratic trajectories.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that ideological polarization in Pakistan has moved beyond traditional party competition and has become a pervasive identity-based phenomenon that deeply shapes political perceptions, social interactions, and democratic processes. The themes that emerged echo global trends in polarized democracies but also reveal unique contextual dynamics tied to Pakistan's political history, media landscape, and socio-cultural divisions.

First, the dominance of polarization as an identity-based conflict aligns with existing research suggesting that when political preferences become embedded in personal identity, disagreement takes on a moral or existential dimension rather than a policy-based one (Iyengar et al., 2019). In Pakistan's context, identity politics is further intensified by religious discourse, regional loyalties, and patronage networks. The participants' experiences show that political identity has become a marker of social belonging, echoing Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) argument that populist mobilization thrives by transforming politics into a struggle between virtuous "people" and corrupt "others." Thus, polarization in Pakistan is not simply ideological; it is affective, moral, and socially embedded.

Second, the finding that digital media acts as a major amplifier of divisive rhetoric is consistent with global research demonstrating that algorithm-driven online ecosystems intensify echo chambers, misinformation, and emotional polarization (Tucker et al., 2018). Participants' experiences of hostility, misinformation, and confrontation on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok illustrate how digital political discourse in Pakistan has shifted from deliberative debate to emotionally charged contestation. This suggests that digital media literacy in Pakistan remains limited and that political parties leverage online communication for emotional mobilization rather than democratic engagement.

Third, the erosion of dialogue, civic reasoning, and compromise highlights a critical democratic deficit. Dahl's (1989) classic conception of democracy emphasizes negotiation, pluralism, and accommodation as essential democratic practices. However, the participants' narratives reflect a sharp decline in tolerance for opposing views within families, educational institutions, and workplaces. Political disagreement is increasingly seen as a threat rather than an opportunity for debate. The findings suggest that political leaders model the same uncompromising rhetoric, which is mirrored by supporters at the grassroots level.

Fourth, the theme of symbolic electoral behavior demonstrates that voting decisions are shaped more by emotional or identity-based commitments than by rational evaluations of performance or policy platforms. This aligns with contemporary research showing that polarization promotes blind loyalty and reduces voters' critical assessment of governance (Gidron et al., 2020). In Pakistan, narratives of sacrifice, victimhood, anti-corruption, or religious responsibility dominate campaign rhetoric, overshadowing substantive policy issues such as economic management, education, and institutional reform. This poses a significant threat to democratic accountability, as it weakens incentives for political parties to improve governance performance.

Finally, participants' concerns about democratic instability and institutional erosion reflect a core finding of the study: ideological polarization threatens Pakistan's political coherence and democratic trajectory. The perception that political actors delegitimize institutions when outcomes are unfavorable resonates with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) argument that democratic erosion accelerates when political elites weaken trust in electoral and judicial processes. Respondents' fears of authoritarian tendencies, civic fragmentation, and declining institutional credibility underscore a broader democratic fragility.

Collectively, the findings indicate that polarization in Pakistan both mobilizes political participation and simultaneously undermines democratic norms, rational public debate, and institutional stability. While some participants acknowledged that polarization energizes political engagement, this engagement is primarily emotional and reactive. Thus, the study confirms that ideological polarization in Pakistan contributes to democratic stress, reduces tolerance for pluralism, and poses long-term risks for political stability.

Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth qualitative exploration of ideological polarization in Pakistan and its implications for political behavior and democratic stability. Through phenomenological inquiry, the research uncovers how citizens experience polarization as a deeply personal, identity-driven phenomenon that shapes social relationships, digital interactions, and electoral decision-making. The findings demonstrate that polarization in Pakistan is no longer confined to party lines but reflects entrenched social identities intensified by digital media and populist political rhetoric.

The study concludes that ideological polarization significantly influences voting behavior by promoting symbolic, emotionally driven choices rather than rational, policy-based decision-

making. This shift weakens democratic accountability and increases vulnerability to populist appeals. Moreover, polarization is shown to erode democratic values such as tolerance, compromise, and constructive dialogue—values essential for pluralistic democratic functioning. Participants' concerns about institutional credibility, governance paralysis, and political hostility highlight the risk of democratic backsliding.

Ultimately, the study argues that ideological polarization represents a substantial challenge to Pakistan's democratic stability. Addressing this challenge requires enhancing civic education, strengthening media literacy, and promoting cross-party dialogue mechanisms that encourage democratic engagement rooted in reasoned deliberation rather than identity-based conflict. The research contributes meaningful insights to the evolving discourse on polarization in South Asia and offers a foundation for future studies on political identity, democratic resilience, and the long-term implications of polarization for Pakistan's political development.

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