

## PUNJAB AND PAKISTAN'S JOURNEY TOWARD HARMONY IN TIMES OF MISRULE

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### Abstract

*This article critically examines Punjab's disproportionate influence in Pakistan's political, military, and bureaucratic structures, and how this dominance contributes to governance crises and the destabilization of national unity. Drawing on historical and contemporary sources, the study explores the roots of Punjabi hegemony, elite capture, institutional inefficiency, and regional alienation. It also evaluates the failure of federal reforms to meaningfully decentralize power and restore inter-provincial trust. The paper concludes by proposing a comprehensive framework for restructuring federalism, enhancing administrative accountability, and promoting inclusive governance to foster long-term national cohesion.*

### Keywords:

Punjab, Pakistan, governance crisis, elite capture, federalism, decentralization, institutional decay, national unity, political patronage, administrative reform.

### 1. Introduction

Pakistan's complex federal structure is rooted in a mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and regional identities. Yet, despite this diversity, the governance model adopted since independence has been overwhelmingly centralized—both politically and institutionally. At the heart of this centralization lies the province of Punjab, which has played a disproportionately dominant role in shaping the Pakistani state's bureaucratic, military, and political contours. This dominance, while historically conditioned and strategically leveraged during the nation-building phase, has evolved into a structural imbalance that contributes significantly to institutional misrule, regional alienation, and democratic stagnation.

Historically, Punjab's ascendancy can be traced to British colonial policies that militarized the region and privileged it through infrastructure development and preferential recruitment. After the Partition of 1947, Punjab became the demographic and administrative core of West Pakistan, absorbing most of the refugee influx and emerging as the locus of civil-military power. Over the decades, this translated into a system of elite capture and political patronage, where the province's ruling class not only controlled access to state resources but also shaped the national narrative—often at the expense of inclusion and pluralism.

Despite attempts at federal reform, such as the 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment and the National Finance Commission (NFC) Awards, meaningful devolution remains elusive. This has led to widespread administrative inefficiency, institutional decay, and a sense of marginalization in provinces like Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As scholars have noted, these dynamics have destabilized national unity and contributed to the rise of regionalist and ethno-nationalist movements that challenge the legitimacy of the state.

In this context, the article critically explores Punjab's central role in Pakistan's governance crisis. It seeks to unpack how historical privilege and contemporary political structures have reinforced Punjab's hegemony, thereby undermining the foundational principles of equity and federalism. By drawing on academic literature, institutional case studies, and reform proposals, the article aims to identify structural solutions that can reorient Pakistan toward a more balanced, accountable, and inclusive federation.

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite the constitutional framework of federalism and the ethnic diversity that defines the Pakistani state, governance in Pakistan remains heavily centralized and dominated by Punjab's political, bureaucratic, and military elite. The existing literature reveals that this dominance—rooted in colonial legacies, post-Partition reconstruction, and military-bureaucratic entrenchment—has led to systemic elite capture, institutional decay, and regional inequities. While Punjab has benefited from disproportionate resource allocation and political control, this asymmetric power structure has deepened inter-provincial mistrust, fostered ethnic grievances, and undermined national cohesion.

Reform efforts, such as the 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment and NFC Awards, have failed to materialize into meaningful decentralization due to entrenched political resistance and institutional inertia, particularly within Punjab. As a result, Pakistan continues to grapple with a governance crisis where centralization, political patronage, and administrative inefficiency hinder inclusive development and democratic stability.

This article seeks to critically examine how Punjab's structural hegemony contributes to Pakistan's broader governance failures and poses a threat to federal harmony. It aims to identify policy solutions that can rebalance power, promote institutional accountability, and construct a more equitable and cooperative federation.

## 3. Literature Review

The question of Punjab's disproportionate dominance in Pakistan's political, military, and administrative structure has long attracted scholarly attention. Researchers from diverse fields—political science, history, governance, and federalism—have highlighted how structural inequities and centralized control contribute to recurring patterns of misrule and regional alienation. This literature review synthesizes foundational works that explore the evolution, entrenchment, and consequences of Punjabi hegemony within the broader context of Pakistan's state-building efforts.

The roots of Punjab's dominance are widely traced to colonial administrative strategies. Zutshi (2019) explains how the British constructed Punjab as a frontier region critical to imperial security, rewarding it with irrigation projects (canal colonies), political patronage, and preferential military recruitment. The martial race theory, which labeled Punjabis (especially Sikhs and Muslims from Potohar) as superior soldiers, laid the foundation for their overrepresentation in the colonial army—a trend that continued post-1947.

Nevile (2006) provides a rich socio-political account of Punjab during and after Partition. He shows that the post-Partition state-building vacuum, filled by civil-military elites predominantly from Punjab, cemented the province's status as the political and bureaucratic core of Pakistan. This dominance was further institutionalized in the early years of nationhood, particularly through the disproportionate resettlement of refugee populations in Punjab, which brought both demographic and political weight to the province.

Sharma (2024) situates Punjab's centrality within a fiscal federalism framework, arguing that centralized resource allocation became a tool to manage separatist tendencies but ended up solidifying unequal power distribution. His work underscores the strategic use of economic policy to reinforce Punjabi institutional primacy.

Hussain and Hussain (1993) offer one of the most influential early analyses of governance failures in Pakistan, emphasizing the central role of elite capture. They describe a power structure where landed aristocrats, military generals, and bureaucrats—largely from Punjab—collude to control the state for personal and class enrichment. Patronage politics, they argue, is not an aberration but the core operating logic of the state.

Akbarzadeh and Saeed (2003) extend this critique to the ideological domain, showing how Punjabi elites often instrumentalize Islamic legitimacy to maintain power, even at the expense of pluralism. Political parties are structured around familial and regional loyalties, with economic and legal incentives flowing through clientelist networks, particularly in Punjab.

Durrani (2018) provides contemporary validation by illustrating how the military-industrial-political complex in Punjab manipulated electoral results and engineered political outcomes—such as the IJI campaign against the PPP—through both formal and informal means.

Scholars have also drawn attention to how elite capture fuels bureaucratic stagnation and inefficiency. Rana (2000) identifies the lack of local governance and the excessive bureaucratization of public service delivery as key barriers to democratic development. He argues that, particularly in Punjab, bureaucracy is not just inefficient but complicit in political manipulation.

Hussain & Hussain (1993) detail how repeated politicization of the civil service, especially under military rule, has paralyzed Pakistan's administrative machinery. Provinces such as Punjab, despite better infrastructure, still suffer from weak public service delivery due to institutional opacity, lack of autonomy, and resistance to innovation.

Mishra (2021) links administrative decay to state-nation disjunction, where the state continues to operate in centralized and exclusionary modes even as society becomes more fragmented and regionally assertive.

The implications of Punjab's dominance extend beyond governance into the realm of national cohesion and identity. Jacques (1999) draws comparisons between Pakistan and Bangladesh, emphasizing how state-sponsored exclusion and regional neglect lead to alienation and, eventually, secession.

Sharma further notes that conditional federal concessions—granted during moments of unrest—often function as symbolic appeasement rather than structural reform. This reinforces mistrust, especially in Balochistan and Sindh, where resources are extracted but not equitably distributed.

Jaswal argues that Punjab's symbolic centrality in national media and education systems has rendered non-Punjabi identities peripheral, creating a “mono-ethnic national imaginary” that is inconsistent with Pakistan's demographic realities. This, she argues, has inflamed ethno-nationalist movements like the PTM, Jeay Sindh, and the Baloch resistance.

A significant body of scholarship has shifted toward proposing solutions rooted in structural reform. Sharma (2024) advocates for a genuine implementation of fiscal federalism, whereby provinces are granted both administrative and financial autonomy. He emphasizes that Punjabi elites must lead the decentralization process if it is to gain legitimacy.

Durrani (2018) and Rana (2000) stress the urgency of local government revitalization. They argue that governance must shift from the hands of bureaucrats and MNAs to locally elected representatives to improve responsiveness and break patronage networks.

Hussain & Hussain (1993) propose institutional accountability frameworks, including judicial reform and depoliticization of bureaucracies. Meanwhile, Akbarzadeh and Saeed (2003) call for pluralistic state ideologies that replace religious exclusivism and ethnic hegemony with inclusive civic nationalism.

The reviewed literature reveals a consensus that Punjab's historic and institutional overrepresentation—though instrumental in state formation—has contributed significantly to national fragmentation and governance decay. Elite capture, administrative inertia, and exclusionary narratives perpetuate a vicious cycle that centralizes power but weakens unity. Scholarly voices uniformly call for a reimagining of Pakistan's federal architecture: one that redistributes power, decentralizes authority, and embraces diversity as a strength rather than a threat.

#### 4. Governance and Misrule

Despite Punjab's central role in Pakistan's political and institutional machinery, the country continues to grapple with chronic governance failures. These include widespread corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, elite capture of state resources, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Far from creating stability, Punjab's overrepresentation has paradoxically fueled a governance model that exacerbates inequality and institutional decay across Pakistan.

##### 1. Elite Capture and Political Patronage

Elite capture refers to a condition in which resources, institutions, and decision-making processes are disproportionately controlled by a small, privileged segment of society—often to the detriment of broader public interest. In the context of Pakistan, and particularly Punjab's role within it, elite capture has been one of the most persistent obstacles to good governance and inclusive development.

##### 1.1. Definition and Mechanism of Elite Capture in Pakistan

In Pakistan, elite capture manifests through both formal and informal networks that bind the military, landed aristocracy, industrial capitalists, and bureaucrats—many of whom have historically hailed from Punjab. This group exercises disproportionate influence over:

- Policy formulation
- Budget allocations
- Institutional appointments
- Access to justice and state services

These elites operate within a framework where state institutions function less as public service providers and more as tools of wealth preservation and political dominance.

##### 1.2. The Punjabi Nexus in State Institutions

Punjab's historic and numerical dominance has allowed its elites to be overrepresented in three of the most critical state institutions:

- **Military:** Most officers and generals come from central and northern Punjab. Their networks extend into economic projects, housing schemes, and industrial enterprises (Sharma, 2024).

- **Bureaucracy:** From colonial days, Punjabi families entered civil services in large numbers. The tradition continued post-independence, concentrating administrative power in their hands (Hussain & Hussain, 1993).
- **Politics:** Major political parties like the PML-N and factions of the PPP have relied on Punjab's vote banks and elite endorsements, perpetuating a feudal-electoral complex.

This triple capture enables Punjabi elites to manipulate policy decisions that affect all of Pakistan, while primarily serving their own interests.

### 1.3. Political Patronage: The Engine of Elite Power

Political patronage is a method by which elites maintain their grip by distributing jobs, contracts, police protection, and government subsidies in exchange for loyalty. This patron-client relationship undermines meritocracy and democratic accountability.

In Punjab, patronage works through:

- **Local government control:** Provincial administrations often manipulate municipal appointments and development funds to benefit supporters.
- **Police and land disputes:** Elites intervene in legal matters for constituents in exchange for political support.
- **Development Projects:** Large-scale infrastructure—like the Metro Bus and Orange Line projects—are disproportionately concentrated in central Punjab, often as political tokens rather than need-based allocations.

This approach creates a cycle of dependency where constituents rely on personal access to power rather than institutional justice or service delivery.

### 1.4. Consequences of Elite Capture and Patronage

- Elections become vehicles for elite legitimacy rather than instruments of people's power.
- Public offices lose autonomy and effectiveness as they are repurposed to serve narrow elite interests.
- Funds are diverted toward elite strongholds (urban Punjab) at the cost of rural areas and other provinces like Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Talented individuals outside elite networks find it difficult to rise through the ranks in government, academia, or business.

### 1.5. Vicious Circle of Inequality

The interplay of elite capture and political patronage creates a self-reinforcing system. Resources are accumulated by elites who then use those very resources—economic, bureaucratic, and military—to sustain their dominance. In Punjab, this has meant that even well-intentioned reforms are hijacked to preserve the status quo. For instance, land reforms in the 1970s were never fully implemented because landed Punjabi politicians in the National Assembly had the leverage to dilute or block them.

Elite capture and political patronage are not incidental in Pakistan—they are central to the way power is distributed and exercised. Punjab's elites, due to historical privilege and demographic weight, have played a dominant role in reinforcing these mechanisms. If left unchecked, this system threatens not just governance, but the very integrity of Pakistan's federalism and democracy.

## 2. Administrative Inefficiency and Institutional Decay

Administrative inefficiency and institutional decay in Pakistan are deeply interlinked phenomena that have critically undermined governance, development, and citizen trust in the state.



Despite the centralization of power and resources—often concentrated in Punjab—Pakistan’s administrative apparatus has failed to deliver efficient, transparent, and responsive services. This inefficiency is not merely a result of poor training or lack of capacity; it is the outcome of deeply embedded structural flaws, political manipulation, and legacy practices inherited from colonial rule.

### 2.1. Colonial Bureaucratic Legacy

The roots of Pakistan’s administrative system lie in the British colonial bureaucracy, designed not for public service but for control and extraction. This system, characterized by rigid hierarchies, procedural formalism, and authoritarian control, was preserved after independence. In Punjab, the Deputy Commissioner-centric model remained powerful for decades, often acting more as a colonial viceroy than a democratic administrator.

This legacy contributed to:

- Excessive centralization
- Lack of citizen participation
- Delays in decision-making
- A culture of unaccountability

### 2.2. Overcentralization and Overlapping Jurisdictions

Pakistan’s administrative system is heavily centralized, especially at the federal and provincial levels. Punjab, being the most populous and institutionally dominant province, benefits from this centralization, yet it also suffers from the same inefficiencies:

- Multiple agencies often work on the same tasks (e.g., local development), leading to redundancy.
- Senior civil servants are rotated frequently, which impedes continuity in policy implementation.
- Bureaucratic postings, especially in Punjab, are often based on loyalty rather than merit, undermining institutional integrity.

This results in a lack of policy coherence and underutilization of available human and fiscal resources.

### 2.3. Weak Local Governance

A major contributor to administrative decay is the persistent neglect of local government systems, particularly in Punjab. Despite being the wealthiest and most organized province:

- Local government systems are frequently suspended or restructured when they challenge provincial political elites.
- Development funds are withheld or misdirected, often funneled through provincial ministries and MNAs instead of elected local councils.
- Citizen access to services (sanitation, education, healthcare) is therefore hindered by over-reliance on centralized bodies instead of community-level administration.

This weakens grassroots democracy and increases the burden on provincial bureaucracies, making them slower and less responsive.

### 2.4. Corruption and Rent-Seeking Behavior

Corruption thrives in an inefficient administrative system. Public officials at various levels engage in rent-seeking activities such as:

- Bribery for file movement or permits
- Kickbacks on development projects
- Manipulation of land records, especially in Punjab where real estate value is high

The lack of digital transparency, absence of independent oversight, and weak internal audit systems contribute to a culture of impunity. Even when Punjab has piloted reform initiatives like computerized land records (PLRA), these are often limited in reach or co-opted by existing power brokers.

### 2.5. Institutional Paralysis in Crisis Management

Administrative inefficiency becomes glaringly visible during crises such as floods, epidemics, or political unrest. Institutions fail to coordinate, resources are delayed, and the chain of command is unclear.

For example:

- The 2014 Model Town incident in Lahore highlighted the dysfunction between police, civil administration, and political leadership.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Punjab's bureaucracy was caught between federal guidelines and provincial political pressure, creating inconsistent enforcement.

### 2.6. Lack of Performance Accountability

Performance evaluation systems within Pakistani bureaucracies, especially in Punjab, are outdated and ceremonial. Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) are rarely linked to actual outcomes, promotions are seniority-based, and penalties for underperformance are almost nonexistent.

This environment:

- Discourages innovation and risk-taking
- Encourages "status quo survival" rather than reform
- Undermines trust in institutions

Administrative inefficiency and institutional decay in Pakistan, while affecting all provinces, are especially paradoxical in Punjab—where the state's most powerful actors reside and operate. The very institutions that should exemplify good governance are often the slowest to reform. Unless Pakistan and Punjab in particular overhaul bureaucratic structures, empower local governments, and institutionalize merit-based accountability, these inefficiencies will continue to block progress and deepen the disconnect between the state and its citizens.

## 3. Destabilization of National Unity

Despite being envisioned as a federal republic comprised of diverse ethnic and regional identities, Pakistan has struggled to forge cohesive national unity. A major contributor to this failure has been the overconcentration of power, resources, and representation in Punjab—a dynamic that has fueled alienation, fostered resentment, and undermined the spirit of federalism. Instead of promoting integration, this imbalance has often worked against national unity, destabilizing the federation politically, socially, and culturally.

### 3.1. Perceived Punjabi Hegemony and Regional Alienation

Punjab's dominance in Pakistan's military, bureaucracy, and political apparatus has created a perception among other provinces—especially Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—that the state serves Punjabi interests at their expense. This perception is not unfounded:

- A disproportionate number of senior military officers hail from Punjab, making national defense institutions appear ethnically skewed.
- The National Finance Commission (NFC) Award has been critiqued for favoring Punjab in terms of federal resource allocation, while provinces like Balochistan, despite producing natural gas, receive less per capita funding and infrastructure investment.
- National media, curriculum, and narratives are largely centered around Punjabi culture or Urdu-speaking elites, leaving local languages and histories suppressed or ignored.

This has resulted in regionalist movements, ethnic protests, and calls for greater autonomy, all of which threaten national cohesion.

### 3.2. Rise of Ethno-Nationalism and Separatist Movements

The overcentralized governance model has pushed marginalized regions toward ethno-nationalist ideologies that challenge the legitimacy of the federal government:

- **Balochistan:** The province has witnessed several insurgencies since 1948, fueled by grievances over control of natural resources and political exclusion. The assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti in 2006 intensified anti-state sentiment.
- **Sindh:** The Sindhi nationalist movement, represented by parties like the Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, has long demanded recognition of Sindh's unique identity and more control over its economy.
- **Pashtun Belt:** The emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) reflects deep-seated frustrations over military operations, enforced disappearances, and lack of representation.

These movements are not inherently anti-Pakistan; they are, in many ways, responses to the failure of the state—driven in large part by Punjab-centric policies—to recognize pluralism.

### 3.3. Undermining of Federalism

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution (2010) was a landmark attempt to decentralize power by transferring key legislative and financial responsibilities to the provinces. While the amendment was supported by all major political parties, its implementation has been uneven, and in many cases obstructed:

- Federal ministries have retained control over devolved functions such as education, health, and labor.
- Punjab, benefiting most from the status quo, has been ambivalent toward deep decentralization, fearing it may dilute its political influence.
- The judiciary and military—institutions heavily influenced by Punjabi elites—have occasionally intervened to recentralize authority under the guise of national security or legal uniformity.

This selective commitment to federalism erodes the trust of smaller provinces, reinforcing their belief that decentralization is merely symbolic.

### 3.4. Political Instability and Institutional Distrust

The unequal power dynamics and perceived Punjabi favoritism have contributed to frequent political crises, including:

- Civilian governments, even when elected by national consensus, are often undermined by the military establishment with backing from Punjab-based institutions.
- Courts have sometimes been accused of taking partisan stances aligned with elite interests, further alienating citizens from the legal system.
- Regions like Gilgit-Baltistan and tribal districts have long experienced delayed electoral reforms and lack of provincial status, fueling suspicions of second-class citizenship.

Such conditions make it difficult to establish a shared national vision, as citizens identify more strongly with ethnic, tribal, or regional affiliations than with a central state perceived as exclusionary.

### 3.5. Impact on National Security

Destabilization of unity doesn't just manifest in politics—it has direct consequences for internal security and foreign policy:



- Discontent in border provinces like Balochistan and KP creates vulnerabilities to foreign interference, particularly from India and Afghanistan.
- Ethnic unrest and provincial grievances reduce cooperation with federal security agencies, hampering counterterrorism and disaster response efforts.
- Lack of unity weakens public morale and national identity, making it difficult to mobilize society in times of external threats or economic crises.

Punjab's overrepresentation in state institutions—while historically conditioned—has inadvertently contributed to the fragmentation of the national fabric. Instead of acting as a bridge among Pakistan's diverse regions, Punjab has become a symbol of inequity for many. To reverse this destabilization, Pakistan must recommit to equitable federalism, genuine decentralization, and inclusive nation-building that respects the identities and rights of all its constituent units. Without this, the dream of unity will remain elusive—and the threat of disintegration will persist.

## 5. Way Forward

Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where continued centralization, ethnic exclusion, and elite dominance threaten not only democratic growth but the very cohesion of the federation. While Punjab's institutional centrality is historically entrenched, sustainable national unity can only be achieved through structural reforms that dismantle the current system of misrule. The path forward must be rooted in inclusive federalism, accountable governance, equitable resource distribution, and a reimagined national identity.

### 1. Deepening Federalism through Genuine Devolution

The first and most urgent reform is to operationalize and strengthen the 18th Constitutional Amendment:

- Transfer full administrative and financial control of sectors like education, health, and local development to the provinces, and further down to districts.
- Establish a constitutional oversight body that ensures the federal government does not reverse or override provincial mandates.
- Each province, including Punjab, must institutionalize autonomous local bodies with guaranteed fiscal allocations and election cycles. Local government reform in Punjab should be revived and insulated from political manipulation.

A truly devolved structure ensures that governance reflects local needs and reduces inter-provincial mistrust.

### 2. Dismantling Elite Capture through Institutional Reforms

The grip of elite families, especially in Punjab, on Pakistan's institutions can only be broken through systemic restructuring:

- Reintroduce competitive and transparent recruitment in civil services with quotas not just for provinces but for underdeveloped districts within each province.
- Legislate campaign finance limits and transparency mechanisms to reduce the influence of dynastic elites in elections.
- Public officials and their families should be subject to routine asset disclosure and barred from participating in government contracts.

Such reforms must start from Punjab—the center of elite control—to set the tone for national transformation.

### 3. Strengthening Accountability and Administrative Efficiency

Reinvigorating public trust in state institutions requires making them responsive and transparent:

- Punjab's partial success with e-land records should be expanded into all service sectors (licensing, utilities, taxation) to reduce corruption.
- Introduce performance-based promotion and incentive systems across all provinces. Replace outdated Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) with modern performance appraisals linked to outcomes.
- Create autonomous provincial accountability commissions (separate from NAB), with powers to investigate corruption and administrative failure across all departments.

Administrative modernization would ensure that the state serves citizens rather than elite networks.

### 4. Equitable Resource Distribution and Development Justice

Addressing economic grievances is essential to rebuild trust among Pakistan's federating units:

- Introduce new variables in resource sharing, including backwardness, area size, natural resource contribution, and multidimensional poverty—especially to benefit Balochistan, South Punjab, and rural Sindh.
- Provinces must have legislative control over extraction and royalty systems, as promised in Article 172(3) of the Constitution.
- Federal and provincial development budgets must prioritize lagging districts over politically influential urban centers. For Punjab, this means shifting focus from Lahore-centric mega-projects to South Punjab and rural areas.

### 5. Promoting an Inclusive and Pluralistic National Identity

To address the alienation that fuels regional nationalism, Pakistan must embrace diversity as strength:

- Include major regional languages (Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Seraiki) in the national education system and media.
- Replace mono-ethnic, military-heavy narratives with inclusive accounts of contributions from all ethnic and religious communities.
- Promote inter-provincial cultural exchanges through state media and support artistic expressions that celebrate pluralism.

Punjab, due to its size and influence, should lead this cultural democratization rather than dominate it.

### 6. Resolving Civil-Military Imbalance and Strengthening Civilian Institutions

Sustainable governance cannot exist without civilian supremacy

- Establish defense committees with elected members having oversight powers.
- Remove serving or retired military officers from key bureaucratic and commercial appointments unless justified by expertise.
- Intelligence agencies must operate within legal frameworks and report to elected representatives.
- Punjab-based military establishments must recognize that institutional balance strengthens, rather than weakens, national security.

Pakistan's long-term stability hinges on its ability to transform Punjab's dominance from a source of tension into a force for equity and reform. By reconfiguring the relationship between

center and provinces, empowering local governance, dismantling elite patronage, and fostering pluralistic nationhood, Pakistan can evolve into a truly cooperative federation. This is not merely a political necessity—it is a democratic imperative.

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