

PAKISTAN BEYOND THE HEADLINES: NARRATIVES OF A FAILED STATE, GROUND REALITIES, AND THE ENDURING SPIRIT OF THE NATION (2019–2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the dominant international and domestic narratives that frame Pakistan as a "failed state," contrasting them with on-ground political, institutional, and social realities during the period 2019 - 2024. While headlines often portray Pakistan through the lens of extremism, political instability, and economic fragility, this research highlights the complexities, resilience, and enduring spirit that define the nation beyond these oversimplified labels. It investigates the roots of the "failed state" discourse shaped by geopolitical interests, media representations, and selective historical interpretation and juxtaposes these with evidence of democratic transitions, civil society engagement, youth political participation, and institutional reforms. Drawing from political communication theories, postcolonial perspectives, and political sociology, the study deconstructs myths and offers a nuanced narrative of Pakistan's evolving identity. This research contributes to political science by broadening the understanding of state performance in postcolonial contexts and challenging monolithic portrayals that ignore the dynamic, often contradictory, political landscape of Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan politics, failed state narrative, political resilience, civil-military relations, democratic transition, postcolonial state, media discourse, political identity, 2019–2024.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Pakistan has frequently been the subject of bleak portrayals in international media and policy circles, often labeled as a "failed state" teetering on the edge of collapse. These narratives typically emphasize a range of challenges: persistent political instability, economic turbulence, religious extremism, civil-military tensions, and fragile democratic institutions. The term "failed state," while rhetorically powerful, tends to obscure more than it reveals, overlooking the socio-political nuances, institutional complexity, and resilience of Pakistan's governance

mechanisms. This study seeks to critically deconstruct these dominant discourses by investigating their origins, evolution, and impact on global perceptions and internal policy-making. Through a political science lens, the research highlights how such labels are not only reductionist but also serve strategic interests of external powers, influencing foreign policy behavior and diplomatic engagements with Pakistan (Kaplan, 2008; Rotberg, 2004; Shah, 2014)

While external narratives have painted Pakistan in monochrome, ground realities reveal a

nation that continues to function often under severe duress—but one that has shown remarkable adaptability. From democratic transitions and judicial assertiveness to the growth of digital activism and civil society's expanding role, the period from 2019 to 2024 captures a phase of both crisis and transformation. The ousting of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a vote of no confidence in 2022 and the turbulent lead-up to the 2024 general elections showcase Pakistan's political system's volatile yet active character. Civil-military relations, although contentious, have witnessed gradual shifts in power dynamics. This phase has also seen a surge in youth-led political awareness, legal reform activism, and a recalibration of economic policy under international pressure, particularly from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). These developments underscore a more complex reality than that portrayed in headlines and challenge the deterministic logic of state failure theories (Rashid, 2021; Fair, 2020; Yusuf, 2022).

The enduring spirit of Pakistan lies not in its perfection, but in its persistence. Despite socio-economic difficulties, regional hostilities, and institutional weaknesses, the Pakistani state and society have exhibited notable resilience and adaptability. This resilience is visible in grassroots political mobilization, the role of women and minorities in politics, and the evolution of media and digital platforms as tools of both resistance and reform. This research aims to contribute to political science literature by offering a postcolonial critique of state failure narratives and presenting Pakistan as a case study of a "resilient yet contested state." The study draws upon political communication, state theory, and comparative politics to analyze how internal transformations can defy externally imposed categories. It also questions whether the very metrics used to declare a state "failing" are embedded in Western-centric frameworks that fail to recognize indigenous forms of political agency and legitimacy (Saikal, 2019; Lieven, 2012; Siddiqua, 2023).

Theory

Postcolonial State Theory explains how Pakistan's political structure, shaped by colonial

legacies, is often misjudged by Western standards of governance. It challenges the "failed state" label by highlighting the state's adaptive and hybrid nature. This theory views Pakistan's civil-military dynamics and informal institutions as context-specific rather than dysfunctional. It helps uncover the biases in global media and policy narratives. Thus, it reframes Pakistan as a resilient postcolonial state, not a failed one.

Literature Review

The discourse on Pakistan as a "failed state" has been perpetuated by global media, think tanks, and Western policy circles. Authors like Rotberg (2004) and Kaplan (2008) have frequently listed Pakistan among states with weak institutions, porous borders, and an inability to monopolize legitimate violence. These arguments often rely on conventional criteria such as democratic instability, terrorism, corruption, and poor economic performance. However, scholars have criticized this lens as overly simplistic and externally imposed, arguing that such portrayals ignore the historical and structural factors shaping postcolonial states. The repeated classification of Pakistan as "on the brink of collapse" not only reinforces global security anxieties but also narrows policy thinking, which in turn affects both foreign aid structures and diplomatic engagement (Rotberg, 2004; Kaplan, 2008; Zakaria, 2015).

Critiques of the "failed state" narrative are increasingly rooted in postcolonial and indigenous frameworks. Hamza Alavi (1972) introduced the concept of the "overdeveloped state" in postcolonial contexts, arguing that former colonies like Pakistan inherited powerful bureaucratic-military institutions that dominate weak bourgeois classes. This model explains the central role of Pakistan's military and bureaucracy in politics, which, while often criticized as undemocratic, also provides state continuity during political breakdowns. Ayesha Jalal (1995) furthers this view by emphasizing Pakistan's strategic use of authoritarianism and religious identity to preserve territorial unity and international leverage. Such analyses question the West's assumption that state effectiveness must follow liberal-democratic norms, asserting instead that Pakistan's political

hybridity is a rational postcolonial adaptation to internal and external pressures (Alavi, 1972; Jalal, 1995; Saikal, 2019).

Domestic scholarship has also focused on internal sources of resilience within Pakistani society and politics. Anatol Lieven (2012) argues that Pakistan, far from collapsing, is held together by deeply entrenched local patronage systems, kinship networks, and regional power balances that provide alternative forms of governance. These informal institutions, often seen as weaknesses in Western models, actually serve as stabilizers in times of national crises. In a similar vein, Siddiqua (2007) explores the role of Pakistan's military economy and its complex integration into civilian life, suggesting that while it limits democratic growth, it also creates a stable power structure that resists complete state failure. Thus, Pakistan's apparent contradictions—between authoritarianism and democracy, fragility and endurance need to be understood on their own sociopolitical terms (Lieven, 2012; Siddiqua, 2007; Yusuf, 2022).

Lastly, literature on political communication and media studies highlights how international coverage often skews Pakistan's image. Media framing tends to prioritize stories of violence, corruption, and extremism while sidelining evidence of democratic participation, grassroots mobilization, and judicial activism. Fair (2020) and Rashid (2021) argue that such one-sided portrayals not only misinform global audiences but also delegitimize reform movements and civil society efforts within the country. Meanwhile, Pakistani scholars and journalists have increasingly responded by reclaiming narrative space through digital media and academic platforms, complicating the notion of a passive or failing population. These counter-narratives are essential to understanding the "spirit of the nation" that persists despite structural weaknesses and external pressures (Fair, 2020; Rashid, 2021; Shams, 2020).

Problem Statement

Despite persistent global narratives labeling Pakistan as a "failed state," such portrayals often overlook the country's institutional resilience, democratic processes, and evolving political dynamics. These narratives are shaped by Western-centric frameworks that ignore Pakistan's postcolonial complexities and

indigenous political structures. There is a critical gap between media-driven perceptions and ground realities that requires scholarly investigation. This study seeks to bridge that gap by analyzing how myths and external discourses obscure Pakistan's actual political trajectory from 2019 to 2024.

Research Objective

1. To critically analyze the divergence between international narratives that frame Pakistan as a "failed state" and the country's internal political, institutional, and societal developments from 2019 to 2024, using a postcolonial political framework.

Research Question

1. How do global narratives of state failure contrast with Pakistan's ground realities and political resilience during the period 2019–2024?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing discourse analysis of international media, policy reports, and academic literature alongside case studies of key political developments in Pakistan from 2019 to 2024. Data will be supported by expert interviews and content analysis of local narratives to ensure contextual depth.

Data Collection

The study will use secondary data from media reports, academic sources, and policy documents (2019–2024), to explore contrasting narratives about Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The study will employ qualitative content analysis to interpret and compare secondary data sources, including international media reports, academic articles, and policy documents from 2019 to 2024. Through thematic coding, the research will identify recurring patterns, dominant narratives, and contradictions between external portrayals of Pakistan and its internal political realities.

Significance

This study challenges dominant "failed state" narratives about Pakistan by offering a

grounded, postcolonial analysis of its political resilience from 2019 to 2024. It contributes to political science by reframing how state functionality is assessed in postcolonial contexts. The research also highlights the gap between external perceptions and local realities. This understanding is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and media to develop more nuanced and balanced perspectives on Pakistan.

Setting the Narrative Understanding the "Failed State" Label

The concept of the "failed state" emerged prominently in the post-Cold War era, particularly in U.S. and Western strategic literature. It was developed to describe countries perceived as incapable of performing essential state functions such as maintaining territorial integrity, enforcing the rule of law, protecting citizens, and delivering public services. Pakistan has repeatedly appeared in such categorizations due to its political instability, military influence, terrorism threats, and economic crises. Think tanks like the Fund for Peace (through its Fragile States Index) and academic writers like Rotberg (2004) positioned states like Pakistan as risks to global security, especially in the context of nuclear proliferation and Islamist militancy. However, these narratives often generalize complexity and overlook the embedded historical, political, and societal structures that shape postcolonial states (Rotberg, 2004; Fund for Peace, 2023).

Critics argue that the "failed state" narrative is a normative, Western-centric construct that reflects global power asymmetries rather than objective conditions. From a postcolonial perspective, these labels fail to consider how colonial legacies—such as arbitrary borders, extractive institutions, and centralized authority created inherent instability in states like Pakistan. Hamza Alavi's (1972) concept of the "overdeveloped postcolonial state" asserts that the bureaucratic-military elite dominate the political system, not due to failure, but due to structural inheritance. These power dynamics function differently from Western models but remain effective in their own context. Thus, the language of failure masks how alternative forms of statehood operate, particularly in societies marked by diversity, regionalism, and hybrid

political orders (Alavi, 1972; Call, 2010; Bilgin & Morton, 2002).

Moreover, framing Pakistan as a "failed state" often serves geopolitical purposes. Strategic narratives, especially post-9/11, have presented Pakistan as both a critical ally and a perpetual threat. This framing supports military aid, drone policies, and international interventions under the guise of stabilizing a fragile regime. Scholars like Ayesha Jalal (1995) and Anatol Lieven (2012) argue that while Pakistan has struggled with authoritarianism and policy inconsistency, its resilience is embedded in informal institutions, such as kinship networks, religious groups, and local governance models. These structures provide cohesion that the "failed state" index does not measure. Instead of failure, Pakistan presents a case of survival and adaptation under pressure—revealing the limitations of rigid, Western metrics of statehood (Jalal, 1995; Lieven, 2012; Bøås & Jennings, 2007).

To understand the "failed state" label requires unpacking both the power structures behind the term and the lived realities of countries like Pakistan. It is essential to separate empirical challenges from politically charged discourse. A more nuanced approach—rooted in contextual analysis and postcolonial theory—allows scholars to assess states not by their distance from Western norms but by their capacity to function within historical and regional constraints. For Pakistan, the period 2019–2024 illustrates how a state can be labeled as failing while simultaneously negotiating political change, institutional endurance, and national identity (Mamdani, 2004; Tikly, 2020; Rashid, 2021).

Colonial Shadows Pakistan's Political DNA

Pakistan's political DNA cannot be understood without examining its colonial inheritance, which fundamentally shaped the state's institutional structures, political culture, and civil-military relations. As a product of British colonial rule, Pakistan inherited an over centralized bureaucratic and military apparatus designed for control rather than democratic participation. The British model emphasized top-down governance, suppressing indigenous self-rule and promoting loyalty to imperial authority. When Pakistan emerged as a new

nation in 1947, it lacked a strong tradition of democratic institutions, participatory governance, or civilian supremacy. Instead, the colonial administrative legacy favored a powerful civil bureaucracy and military class, which quickly assumed dominant roles in the absence of well-developed political parties and civil society mechanisms (Alavi, 1972; Jalal, 1995; Talbot, 2005).

Hamza Alavi's theory of the "overdeveloped postcolonial state" remains crucial in understanding Pakistan's state formation. Alavi argued that postcolonial states like Pakistan were not organically developed but were structurally distorted by colonial rule, resulting in a dominant alliance of the military-bureaucratic elite. This alliance emerged as the de facto power center, sidelining elected representatives and weakening democratic evolution. From the 1958 military coup by General Ayub Khan to subsequent regimes led by General Zia-ul-Haq and General Musharraf, Pakistan's political trajectory has been repeatedly shaped by a civil-military imbalance rooted in colonial institutional patterns. The colonial emphasis on order, surveillance, and loyalty to the center replaced local autonomy and accountability, hindering federalism and fostering ethnic marginalization (Alavi, 1972; Rizvi, 2000; Siddiqi, 2007).

Moreover, colonial legacies embedded deep distrust between the rulers and the ruled, leading to a political culture characterized by authoritarianism, coercion, and elite capture. The British colonial state governed through a mix of "legal-rational" authority and indirect rule, often co-opting tribal elites, landlords, and religious figures into its structure of control. Pakistan inherited and sustained this patronage system, where state resources were exchanged for political loyalty. The persistence of feudal structures, particularly in provinces like Punjab and Sindh, reflects this colonial logic of governance. These informal power networks remain deeply entangled with formal state institutions, complicating efforts to democratize or decentralize governance (Ludden, 2002; Lieven, 2012; Akbar, 2018).

The colonial legacy also left a lasting impact on Pakistan's legal and judicial systems. The adoption of the Indian Penal Code, British common law, and administrative procedures

designed for colonial control has produced a legal framework often criticized as slow, elitist, and disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens. Instead of transforming these structures post-independence, successive regimes reproduced them, thereby sustaining alienation between state institutions and the public. This has contributed to a crisis of legitimacy, where the legal system is viewed as a tool of the elite rather than a guardian of justice. These judicial constraints further reinforce the concentration of power in unelected institutions like the military and civil bureaucracy (Newberg, 1995; Ginsburg, 2010; Kennedy, 2002).

Despite seven decades of independence, Pakistan's attempts at reform continue to be undermined by the deep institutional inertia rooted in its colonial DNA. While democratic transitions have occurred, the specter of military intervention, centralized control, and bureaucratic elitism persists. Understanding Pakistan's political DNA through a postcolonial lens enables scholars to move beyond simplistic "failed state" tropes and instead analyze the structural legacies that shape state behavior. Recognizing these colonial shadows is essential not to justify dysfunction, but to contextualize it within a broader historical and institutional framework that requires both reform and decolonization (Bhabha, 1994; Mamdani, 1996; Saeed, 2017).

Manufacturing Perception Global Media and Policy Discourses (2019–2024)

From 2019 to 2024, Pakistan has remained at the center of international attention due to geopolitical tensions, internal political crises, and its complex relationship with global powers. Western media outlets and international policy institutions have consistently portrayed Pakistan through a narrow lens—highlighting instability, terrorism, economic dependency, and military dominance. These portrayals often rely on stereotypical frames of a "nuclear-armed failing state" or a "perpetual security concern," ignoring the country's political pluralism, societal resilience, and institutional contestations. The repeated appearance of Pakistan in global indices such as the Fragile States Index and terrorism watch lists reinforces

a reductive image that shapes public opinion and international diplomacy (Fund for Peace, 2023; Shah, 2020; Fair, 2019).

This narrative manufacturing is closely tied to geopolitical interests. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan's strategic relevance has shifted, prompting policy analysts and media to recast its role from a frontline ally in the "war on terror" to an unstable neighbor with questionable loyalties. Think tanks in Washington, London, and Brussels have issued reports emphasizing Pakistan's alleged support for extremist networks, economic vulnerability under Chinese influence (especially via CPEC), and internal political crackdowns. These perspectives, while partially grounded in fact, often ignore local contexts and internal democratic struggles. The complex political developments from the ousting of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022 to growing judicial activism and electoral mobilization in 2023–24 are sidelined in favor of simplified headlines (Haqqani, 2022; Yusuf, 2023; ICG, 2021).

Global media discourse also tends to overlook the diversity within Pakistani society. News coverage and policy papers rarely focus on grassroots activism, regional political movements, judicial reform efforts, or the youth-led digital political discourse. Social media in Pakistan has increasingly become a site of resistance and political expression—shaping public opinion and even challenging state narratives. Yet, the global gaze remains fixed on Pakistan's security paradigm. This imbalance in representation not only reinforces global north–south asymmetries but also impacts how aid, trade, and diplomatic relations are structured. International financial institutions and development partners are influenced by such constructed perceptions, often leading to conditionality or interventions that lack cultural and political sensitivity (Rashid, 2021; Lieven, 2012; Siddiqi, 2023).

The construction of Pakistan's image in global media is also linked to theories of media imperialism and agenda-setting. According to these frameworks, dominant Western media outlets (e.g., CNN, BBC, The Economist) often prioritize stories that align with the strategic or ideological interests of their home states. Coverage of Pakistan's internal affairs—such as

its handling of terrorism, religious extremism, or minority rights—is rarely contextualized within its postcolonial legacies or regional dynamics. Instead, sensationalism prevails. For example, in the wake of economic difficulties during 2022–2023, media headlines frequently predicted state collapse, omitting concurrent reforms, IMF negotiations, and local adaptive mechanisms. This selective visibility shapes global opinion and reinforces the "failed state" trope (McPhail, 2010; Thussu, 2006; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The period from 2019 to 2024 reveals that the global perception of Pakistan is less a reflection of objective realities and more a product of narrative manufacturing. By privileging certain discourses—militarism, instability, extremism—over others such as democratic resilience, legal reforms, or civic engagement, global media and policy institutions contribute to a skewed understanding of the Pakistani state. Recognizing and challenging this imbalance is not only an academic necessity but a political act of reclaiming narrative sovereignty. A grounded, nuanced analysis is essential for reshaping international engagement with Pakistan based on empirical realities rather than constructed fears (Bilgin & Morton, 2002; Bøås & Jennings, 2007; Saeed, 2017).

Reality Check Democratic Resilience and Institutional Continuity

Despite facing frequent political upheavals, economic crises, and threats from extremism, Pakistan has demonstrated surprising democratic resilience and institutional continuity, particularly from 2019 to 2024. While its democratic journey has been inconsistent, recent years have seen a heightened public engagement with democratic processes, especially through electoral participation, judicial activism, and a growing civil society presence. The peaceful transfer of power in the 2018 and upcoming 2024 elections—despite controversies—reflects an underlying commitment to democratic norms by the electorate, even as political elites often fall short of democratic ideals (Cheema, 2021; Akhtar, 2022; Talbot, 2019).

Pakistan's judiciary, media, and parliament, though under pressure, have maintained relative functional continuity. Judicial

interventions in matters of constitutional interpretation, such as decisions on no-confidence votes or disqualifications, reveal an evolving institutional maturity. Moreover, resistance from civil society against censorship, enforced disappearances, and authoritarian tendencies has helped sustain a democratic spirit, especially in urban centers. The rise of digital media and youth-led political activism on platforms like Twitter and YouTube has further embedded democratic values in public discourse. These developments highlight that despite recurring authoritarian challenges, Pakistan's democratic foundations are neither entirely eroded nor easily extinguished (Rizvi, 2020; Yusuf, 2023; Shah, 2020).

The Spirit of the Nation Cultural, Social, and Regional Endurance

Pakistan's identity is not solely defined by its political turbulence or security challenges; rather, its enduring strength lies in the spirit of its people, reflected in cultural richness, social cohesion, and regional resilience. Despite ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversity, the nation has consistently found unity in pluralism—manifested through shared traditions, festivals, and resistance movements rooted in local values. Cultural expressions such as Sufi poetry, folk music, regional art, and literature continue to serve as powerful unifiers that defy the narrative of fragmentation. From Punjab's vibrant storytelling to Balochistan's rugged tribal pride, Pakistan's cultural mosaic forms a resilient counter-narrative to external portrayals of national disunity (Ahmad, 2021; Lieven, 2011; Saigol, 2016).

Social endurance in Pakistan is also evident through community solidarity during times of crisis—be it floods, earthquakes, pandemics, or displacement. Across provinces, grassroots activism and informal support networks have repeatedly stepped in where formal institutions have struggled. This is especially true for youth and women-led initiatives that are reshaping public space, education, and even political engagement. Moreover, the resilience of regional identities—Sindhi, Pashtun, Baloch, Seraiki—within a larger national framework underscores Pakistan's capacity to hold together its diversity through negotiated coexistence rather than enforced homogeneity. These

dynamics reveal a society that, while tested by adversity, continues to evolve and assert its agency from the ground up (Akhtar, 2020; Nasr, 2009; Khan, 2022).

Deconstructing the Crisis between Narrative and Nation

The crisis between narrative and nation in Pakistan reflects a long-standing tension between how the country is portrayed both internally and externally and how it actually functions and survives as a state and society. Dominant narratives often frame Pakistan as a state perpetually in crisis: failing democracy, civil-military imbalance, economic collapse, and religious extremism. These tropes, frequently circulated through global media and international policy reports, create a monolithic perception of a nation on the edge. However, these narratives often oversimplify the deeply layered political and social complexities of Pakistan, obscuring its grassroots dynamism, institutional resilience, and ongoing efforts for reform (Shah, 2020; Siddiq, 2023; Yusuf, 2021).

Internally, political elites, state institutions, and media actors compete to shape the national story—either by invoking religious unity, military valor, or democratic promise. These results in conflicting narratives that confuse public discourse and undermine social consensus. For example, the military's dominant narrative of national security often clashes with civil society's calls for democratic freedoms and constitutionalism. The 2019–2024 period saw intensified friction between populist politics, establishment-backed stability narratives, and a rising youth movement advocating for transparency and rights through digital platforms. This fragmentation not only fuels distrust but weakens the ability to construct a cohesive national identity that reflects lived realities (Akhtar, 2020; Lieven, 2011; Ahmed, 2022).

Deconstructing this crisis requires a critical understanding of how power, ideology, and representation function in shaping the national imagination. It also involves questioning whose voices are amplified and whose are excluded in constructing Pakistan's story. Recognizing and integrating plural perspectives—from Baloch activists to Punjabi farmers, from urban

feminists to tribal elders—can help rebuild a more inclusive narrative that resonates with diverse citizens. In doing so, the gap between narrative and nation can be narrowed, allowing for a more authentic, resilient, and progressive vision of Pakistan's future (Saigol, 2016; Zia, 2021; Fair, 2019).

Rethinking the State Implications and Ways Forward

Rethinking the state in Pakistan requires moving beyond conventional frameworks centered on security, elite governance, and institutional centralization. The repeated cycles of political instability, civil-military tensions, judicial overreach, and economic fragility between 2019 and 2024 have revealed critical gaps in the state's capacity to govern inclusively and responsively. These shortcomings are not merely administrative—they reflect a deeper structural disconnect between state institutions and the lived realities of citizens. Addressing this disconnect calls for reconceptualizing the state as a service provider, rather than merely a security enforcer or power broker (Shah, 2020; Cheema & Naseer, 2021; Akhtar, 2020).

One implication of this rethinking is the need to decentralize power through genuine federalism and local governance reforms. Provinces and districts must be empowered not only administratively but also politically and financially. This means strengthening democratic accountability mechanisms at the grassroots, investing in regional capacity building, and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Furthermore, the state must prioritize social inclusion by integrating marginalized voices women, minorities, youth, and peripheral regions—into policymaking processes. Such a shift requires both political will and structural reform, supported by an active civil society and transparent media (Bari, 2022; Saeed, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2021).

The way forward involves reimagining the social contract between the state and its people, grounded in rights, responsibilities, and mutual trust. This includes investing in education, digital governance, public health, and climate resilience areas where Pakistan's youth demographic could play a transformative role. The post-2019 public mobilizations and digital

activism reflect an emerging demand for accountability and participatory governance, signaling that the future of the Pakistani state lies in empowering citizens, not controlling them. A rethought state must be more inclusive, people-centered, and forward-looking capable of negotiating internal diversity while remaining anchored in democratic legitimacy (Lieven, 2011; Siddiqua, 2023; Yusuf, 2023).

Conclusion

Pakistan's journey from 2019 to 2024 reveals a nation often misunderstood and misrepresented—trapped between headlines of crisis and the realities of resilience. While narratives of state failure and institutional fragility dominate global and domestic discourse, the enduring spirit of Pakistan lies in its people's cultural depth, social solidarity, and the persistent quest for democratic continuity. The friction between narrative and nation exposes deeper structural challenges, but it also uncovers spaces of hope: youth activism, judicial assertion, grassroots mobilization, and digital engagement. These elements reflect a society not passively enduring hardship, but actively contesting and reimagining its future. To move forward, Pakistan must rethink the role of the state not as a monopolizer of power but as a guarantor of justice, inclusion, and opportunity. This shift demands a new social contract rooted in transparency, decentralization, and participatory governance. By deconstructing rigid power structures and embracing pluralistic narratives, Pakistan can realign its national identity with its lived realities. Ultimately, the strength of the nation lies not in its institutions alone but in the everyday endurance, agency, and aspirations of its people. The challenge is not merely survival but transformation.

Findings

1. Pakistan's global image as a failing state contrasts sharply with its internal democratic and cultural resilience.
2. Political instability persists, but civil society and youth-led digital activism have emerged as forces of reform.
3. Competing national narratives weaken social cohesion and policy clarity across institutions.

4. The state's centralization of power continues to alienate marginalized regions and communities.
5. Pakistan's cultural diversity and grassroots solidarity are key to its national endurance.
6. Democratic institutions, though under pressure, have shown functional continuity post-2019.
7. External media narratives often ignore localized progress and regional strength.
8. Reimagining the state requires a shift toward inclusive governance and citizen empowerment.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen democratic institutions through judicial independence and electoral transparency.
2. Decentralize governance to empower provinces and local governments with fiscal and political autonomy.
3. Promote inclusive narratives by integrating voices from all ethnic, religious, and regional communities.
4. Reform civil-military relations to ensure constitutional supremacy and civilian oversight.
5. Invest in education, digital literacy, and civic engagement to cultivate informed citizenry.
6. Support independent media and digital platforms to counter disinformation and promote public accountability.
7. Foster youth participation in policymaking through institutional platforms and national dialogue forums.
8. Reframe Pakistan's global image through cultural diplomacy and diaspora engagement.

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