



Religious Authoritarian Enclaves and the Crisis of Democracy in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper discusses how widespread religious authoritarian enclaves in Pakistan have influenced the democratization in the country. Though democracy was the aspiration since independence, political history of Pakistan shows that it has been interrupted by authoritarian practices that are coexisting with its democratic framework. Within such enclaves, religious enclaves are amongst the most persistent, based on constitutional provision, religious power and ideology. It uses qualitative content analysis of constitutional texts, political speeches and secondary scholarship in tracing how religious enclaves came into existence, how they have been consolidated over the years through the witnessing of the Objectives Resolution and subsequent adoption of the 1973 Constitution, and how the enclaves have further been entrenched by General Zia-ul-Haq during his Islamization project. The analysis shows how these enclaves compromise parliamentary sovereignty, inhibit pluralism and minority rights, and legitimize hybrid regimes. The findings suggest that unlike military or feudal enclaves, religious enclaves derive their strength not only from institutional positioning but also from ideological legitimacy, making them more durable and difficult to reform. The article concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for separating religion and politics in order to strengthen democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Keywords: Religious Authoritarian Enclaves; Pakistan; Democracy; Hybrid Regimes; Islamization; Objectives Resolution; Clergy; Pluralism; Authoritarianism

Article Details:

Received on 10 Aug 2025

Accepted on 05 Sept 2025

Published on 06 Sept 2025

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INTRODUCTION

The endurance of authoritarian enclaves within democratic regimes presents one of the most complex challenges to democratic consolidation in the contemporary world. While democracy has been globally acknowledged as a legitimate system of governance premised upon popular sovereignty, individual freedoms, and participatory accountability (Heywood, 2002), the persistence of non-democratic spaces within otherwise democratic states undermines these ideals. These enclaves, whether military, tribal, or religious in nature, represent pockets of authority that operate outside the spirit of democratic norms and often challenge the supremacy of elected institutions. Scholars such as Lawson (2009) describe these spaces as “durable pockets of authoritarian practice” that remain embedded in democratic regimes, shaping political behavior and constraining democratic outcomes.

In the case of Pakistan, authoritarian enclaves have historically obstructed the smooth functioning of democracy since its inception in 1947. Although the country was founded on the promise of democratic self-determination, political transitions have repeatedly been subverted by undemocratic forces including military takeovers, feudal aristocracies, and politicized religious authority (Jalal, 1995; Choudhury, 1969). Among these, religious authoritarian enclaves have proved especially resilient and influential. These enclaves draw legitimacy from the intertwining of religious identity with statehood, a relationship institutionalized through constitutional provisions such as the Objectives Resolution of 1949 and later reinforced by Islamic clauses in the 1973 Constitution. The clergy, religious parties, and militant groups have acted as powerful actors that both influence and constrain political leadership.

The persistence of these religious enclaves is rooted in a broader historical and ideological struggle over the role of Islam in the state. Pakistan’s founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioned a democratic republic where citizens of all faiths would enjoy equal rights. However, soon after independence, clerical elites and political leaders instrumentalized religion to assert power, contest secular tendencies, and legitimize authoritarian regimes (Ziring, 1999). This instrumentalization was intensified under General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization program (1977–1988), which embedded religious orthodoxy into law, politics, and public life (Haqqani, 2005). As a result, Pakistan’s democratic trajectory has often been diverted into authoritarian directions, where the veneer of electoral competition coexists with authoritarian religious influence, creating what scholars term a “hybrid regime” (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The significance of studying religious authoritarian enclaves in Pakistan lies in understanding how they shape the democratic deficit and perpetuate cycles of instability. Unlike the military or feudal enclaves, religious enclaves rely on ideological legitimacy rather than coercion alone, making them particularly potent in influencing the political imagination of the masses. These enclaves constrain democratic pluralism, restrict minority rights, and undermine parliamentary sovereignty by positioning divine authority above popular will. Consequently, they pose enduring challenges to the project of democratic consolidation.

This article seeks to analyze the rise, persistence, and implications of religious authoritarian enclaves in Pakistan’s democratic experience. Specifically, it explores three central questions: (1) How did religious enclaves historically emerge and consolidate in Pakistan’s political system? (2) What role have religious elites and ideologies played in obstructing democratic development? (3) How do these enclaves contribute to Pakistan’s hybrid regime structure? Through a qualitative content analysis of historical documents,

constitutional texts, and secondary scholarship, this study aims to contribute to the broader literature on authoritarian enclaves by focusing on religion as a particularly entrenched barrier to democratization.

By addressing these questions, the study adds to the comparative scholarship on authoritarian enclaves in democratic regimes while shedding light on Pakistan's unique challenges at the intersection of religion and politics. The analysis also provides policy insights for strengthening democratic institutions and advancing the principle of separation between religion and state—an imperative for ensuring democratic stability in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society such as Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON AUTHORITARIAN ENCLAVES

The idea of authoritarian enclaves has become quite popular in comparative politics, especially in research on democratic transitions and hybrid regimes. Lawson and Chappell (2002) in a study of Mexico came up with the term in a bid to characterize the spaces in which authoritarian practices persisted in conflict with the democratic norms and rules of the game. Their work showed how localised forms of authoritarianism could go on even in democracies, resulting in a twofold version of reality which saw elections coexisting with highly authoritarian traditions. Benton (2012) reinforced this argument by focusing on subnational enclaves of authoritarianism in Mexico and outlined how local elites were capable of sheltering themselves behind the law and coercion in order to avoid any democratic regulation.

Such survival of enclaves is not restrictive to Latin America. Montes and Vial (2005) have discussed the democratic transition in Chile, stating that authoritarian clauses in the Constitution of 1980 were deliberately incorporated so as to safeguard the former military regime and the elements that had been supportive of the military. In their analysis, it was noted that authoritarian enclaves tend to serve as an institutional legacy to be perpetuated even after the democratization process and hence, restrict new democratic regimes. Likewise, Gilley (2009) described these enclaves as “institutional spaces in the state or society whose adherence to authoritarian norms rises in conflict with democratic regimes.” This framing suggests that authoritarian enclaves are not anomalies but systemic features of democratization processes.

The theoretical implication of this literature is that enclaves function as hybrid zones where authoritarian and democratic logics overlap. They can manifest as entrenched elites, politicized militaries, or religious authorities that command legitimacy beyond electoral mandates. Consequently, their persistence creates what Levitsky and Way (2010) termed “competitive authoritarianism,” where democratic institutions exist but are constantly undermined by authoritarian practices.

RELIGION AS AN AUTHORITARIAN ENCLAVE

While much of the literature on authoritarian enclaves emphasizes military and elite dominance, scholars have increasingly recognized religion as an important locus of authoritarian practices. In many states, religious institutions function as parallel power structures that challenge democratic authority. For example, in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) strategically fused religion with state institutions, thereby eroding secular-democratic norms (Yavuz, 2009). In Iran, clerical authority institutionalized through the Guardian Council exemplifies how religious elites can override electoral outcomes and constrain pluralism (Arjomand, 2000). These cases

illustrate that religious enclaves are particularly potent because they derive authority not merely from institutional power but from ideological and moral claims.

The interplay of religion and authoritarianism has also been explored in South Asian contexts. In India, Hindu nationalism has raised concerns about the erosion of secular democracy and the emergence of religious majoritarian enclaves (Jaffrelot, 2017). Similarly, in Bangladesh, Islamist parties have historically acted as spoilers in democratic consolidation, oscillating between participation in elections and undermining democratic norms through religious mobilization (Riaz, 2004). These examples suggest that religious enclaves are not isolated to Pakistan but reflect a broader challenge faced by multi-religious societies navigating democratization.

AUTHORITARIAN ENCLAVES IN PAKISTAN

Within Pakistan, scholarship on authoritarian enclaves has traditionally focused on the military and feudal structures. Jalal (1995) argued that Pakistan's democratic fragility stemmed from the dominance of civil-military elites and their ability to exploit constitutional loopholes. Ziring (1999) similarly emphasized the entrenched role of the army as both guardian and usurper of the political system. However, alongside these military and feudal enclaves, religious enclaves have played an equally significant role in undermining democratic development.

Religious enclaves in Pakistan can be traced to the early years of independence. The adoption of the Objectives Resolution in 1949, which declared sovereignty belonging to Allah rather than the people, set the foundation for intertwining religion with state legitimacy (Choudhury, 1969). This moment institutionalized the clergy as a gatekeeping force, capable of challenging parliamentary sovereignty. Hussain Haqqani (2005) highlighted the military's use of religion as a tool for legitimacy, particularly under General Zia-ul-Haq, when Islamization policies embedded Sharia-inspired laws and empowered religious elites. These developments transformed religious authority from an ideological movement into a political enclave with real influence over state institutions.

Recent literature continues to underline the entrenchment of these enclaves. Khan (2016) observed that religious elites in Pakistan consistently expressed reservations about core democratic principles, including universal suffrage and parliamentary sovereignty. Instead, they often idealized medieval authoritarian structures as more compatible with Islamic governance. This stance has reinforced authoritarian enclaves within the democratic polity by normalizing religious intervention in political decision-making. Moonis Ahmar (2014) further noted that secularism—an essential component of democratic pluralism—was systematically misinterpreted and maligned in Pakistan's political discourse, thereby strengthening religious enclaves.

GAPS IN EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

Although extensive literature exists on Pakistan's democratic deficits, relatively fewer studies isolate the role of religious enclaves as independent authoritarian spaces within the broader hybrid regime. Much of the scholarship has been military-centric, focusing on coups, civil-military imbalance, and feudal dominance. The religious dimension, though acknowledged, is often treated as secondary. Yet, as this article argues, religious enclaves warrant dedicated analysis because they constrain democracy not through overt coercion alone but through ideological legitimacy and popular mobilization. Their persistence illustrates the difficulty of achieving democratic consolidation in societies where religion and state are historically and discursively intertwined.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the phenomenon of religious authoritarian enclaves in Pakistan's democratic experience. The qualitative approach was found to be most suitable since the topic under examination, namely, religious enclaves and their effects on democratization, are rooted in historical accounts, ideological arguments, and socio-political systems that are inaccessible through mere numerical quantifications. By placing an emphasis on depth instead of breadth, qualitative inquiry is the most appropriate approach to examine how religious authority fuses with political regimes in order to establish hybrid political regimes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary methodological technique of the current study is the content analysis. Content analysis involves the systematic approach employed to make sense of written and documentary material through the identification and enumeration of regular patterns, themes and discourses (Krippendorff, 2013). This approach is specifically applicable to studying political and social reality because it can allow the researcher to review historical accounts, political addresses, constitutional reports and academic literature to determine the manner in which autocratic religious practices can be preserved in a formally democratic society. An inductive coding frame was established, so that instead of imposing preconceived categories, it allows themes to emerge because of the data. This allowed keeping the analysis closer to the Political context of Pakistan.

DATA SOURCES

The research uses both first as well as second hand sources of data, which makes triangulation and increases the validity of the data.

1. Primary Sources: These were written by the state in the form of the Objectives Resolution (1949), the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) and further constitutional amendments that incorporated Islamic contents into the legal system placed by the state. Political speeches by political leaders like Liaquat Ali Khan, General Zia-ul-Haq and other officials of the state were also examined in terms of how they rhetorically employed religion to gain political legitimacy. Primary data like historical documents of the National Archives of Pakistan and press releases of religious and political organizations were used in order to reflect contemporary views on the subject of religion-state relations.
2. Secondary Sources: Scholarly literature was used to give some background and comparative reference. The works of Jalal (1995), Ziring (1999), Haqqani (2005) provided historical perspectives on the political developments in Pakistan, whereas the works by Ahmar (2014) and Khan (2016) reflected on the current debate around questions of secularism and the place of the clergy. Comparative studies on authoritarian enclaves (Lawson & Chappell, 2002; Montes & Vial, 2005; Gilley, 2009) formed the conceptual background and placed the experience of Pakistan into a larger academic dialogue.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Analysis was done in three steps. Primary thematic coding was carried out to the textual data narrowing down to textual mentions of religious authority, clerical authority, and integration of Islam and governance. This contributed to the identification of the common themes, namely the bid to use religion to legitimize politics, antagonism to secularism, and the role of the clergy to oppose democratic standards. Second, comparative mapping was used whereby religious enclaves in Pakistan were placed in the scholarly literature on

authoritarian enclaves. This step made it clear as to whether the case study of Pakistan is unique or signs of a regional and global trend. Triangulation was also employed in order to validate the findings. Primary-source themes were contrasted with those of secondary literature to make sure that interpretations did not depend on one-source bias.

DELIMITATIONS

The research focuses on a civilian-led democracies in Pakistan particularly between 1947 to 1958, 1973 to 1977, 1988 to 1999 and 2008 to 2013. These periods indicate periods where the democratic structures were nominally operational, but religious enclaves had great impact in the political arena and in the administration. While military authoritarian periods are referenced for contextual purposes—particularly General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization policies—the primary analytical focus remains on democratic intervals to highlight how religious enclaves persist even under electoral governments.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research requires reflexivity and methodological rigor. By drawing upon multiple sources of evidence and employing inductive coding, the study mitigates the risks of interpretive bias. Triangulation of primary and secondary data further strengthens reliability, while contextualization within the broader literature on authoritarian enclaves enhances external validity. While qualitative analysis cannot claim universal generalizability, it provides a richly textured account of how religious enclaves function as authoritarian spaces in Pakistan’s hybrid democratic system.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF RELIGIOUS ENCLAVES IN PAKISTAN

The roots of religious authoritarian enclaves in Pakistan can be traced to the foundational years of the state. Although Muhammad Ali Jinnah envisioned Pakistan as a democratic republic where religion would not determine citizenship, early political leadership faced pressure from religious elites who sought to anchor the state in Islamic ideology. This pressure culminated in the passage of the *Objectives Resolution* in 1949, which declared that sovereignty belonged to Allah alone and that political authority was to be exercised within the limits of Islam (Choudhury, 1969). The Resolution, while framed as a guiding principle, had the effect of institutionalizing religion within the constitutional framework. This moment was significant because it shifted the locus of sovereignty from the people to divine authority, thereby legitimizing the clergy as interpreters of state legitimacy.

The institutionalization of the Objectives Resolution provided religious elites with enduring political leverage. By placing divine sovereignty above popular will, the Resolution created a legal and moral precedent for religious actors to challenge parliamentary supremacy and secular interpretations of governance. Scholars such as Jalal (1995) have argued that this early concession to clerical influence was the first major departure from Jinnah’s democratic vision, laying the groundwork for the persistence of religious authoritarian enclaves in the political system. Thus, even before the onset of military authoritarianism, religious enclaves had already secured a position of influence within Pakistan’s democratic framework.

THE CONSTITUTIONALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

The entrenchment of religious enclaves deepened with the adoption of the 1973 Constitution. While the Constitution was celebrated for restoring parliamentary democracy after years of military rule, it simultaneously embedded numerous Islamic provisions, including the declaration of Pakistan as an “Islamic Republic” and

requirements that the President and Prime Minister be Muslims. These provisions further empowered religious groups by granting constitutional recognition to their role in defining the ideological direction of the state. Non-Muslim minorities, who had fought for independence alongside Muslims, began to feel excluded from the political mainstream (Ahmar, 2014).

The inclusion of religious clauses in the Constitution had both symbolic and practical implications. Symbolically, it reinforced the idea that Pakistan was a religiously defined polity, not merely a democratic republic. Practically, it created legal mechanisms that allowed religious groups to challenge political decisions on theological grounds. For instance, amendments that declared the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslims in 1974 illustrate how religious enclaves exerted pressure on democratic institutions to conform to sectarian agendas (Haqqani, 2005). These developments demonstrate how the Constitution became a contested space where democratic and authoritarian religious logics coexisted uneasily, reinforcing the persistence of religious enclaves within the democratic system.

CLERICAL ELITES AS AN AUTHORITARIAN ENCLAVE

The clergy in Pakistan has historically positioned itself as a gatekeeper of political legitimacy. Despite being divided along sectarian lines, clerical groups have frequently mobilized in opposition to secular tendencies and democratic reforms. Religious parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) have played a dual role—participating in elections while simultaneously questioning the sovereignty of parliament to legislate in matters deemed “Islamic” (Khan, 2016). By framing democracy as conditional upon divine authority, these groups have acted as an authoritarian enclave within the democratic polity.

Clerical opposition to secularism has also shaped political discourse. Secularism, which in global contexts is understood as the separation of religion and state, has been consistently misrepresented in Pakistan as anti-religion or irreligious (Ahmar, 2014). Such framing has discredited the secular democratic actors and reinforced the discourse held by religious elites that they have a right to reserve the ideological moorings of Pakistan. The resultant effect is the dissolution of pluralism where dissenting Muslims and non-Muslim citizens are isolated in the democratic process.

THE MOSQUE-MILITARY NEXUS: ISLAMIZATION UNDER ZIA-UL-HAQ

The unification of religious authoritarian enclaves culminated during the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988). The Islamization policies forced by Zia regime, which had been founded on a military coup, attempted to find a legitimised through the integration of religious orthodoxy into law and governance. These were the implementation of Sharia-based punishments (Hudood Ordinances), an obligatory forced one collection of zakat and the introduction of Sharia courts (Haqqani, 2005). By aligning military authoritarianism with religious legitimacy, Zia created a durable nexus between the mosque and the military, amplifying the influence of religious enclaves.

The Islamization process had long-lasting implications. It institutionalized religious authority within state structures, normalized clerical influence in governance, and created an environment where religious identity became central to citizenship and political participation. Moreover, Zia’s support for jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s further empowered religious groups, as madrassas and militant networks flourished with state support. This militarization of religion transformed clerical enclaves from ideological actors into political and even paramilitary forces, capable of shaping both domestic and foreign policy (Ziring, 1999).

DEMOCRATIC PERIODS AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITARIAN PERSISTENCE

Even during democratic intervals, religious enclaves have continued to exercise influence. Civilian governments, wary of alienating religious groups, often adopted conciliatory policies that reinforced clerical authority. For instance, during the 1990s, successive democratic governments faced pressure from religious parties to implement Sharia law, while at the same time attempting to maintain international commitments to democracy and human rights. This balancing act weakened the credibility of democratic institutions, as elected leaders appeared unable or unwilling to assert parliamentary sovereignty over religious claims.

The persistence of these enclaves reflects a broader feature of Pakistan's political system: its hybrid regime character. According to Levitsky and Way (2010), hybrid regimes involve the co-existence of authoritative practices and democratic institutions. In the case of Pakistan, theocratic enclaves are an extreme model of authoritarianism because it did not merely rely on brute force, but was justified by the ideological stories that appealed to the masses in the country. This is what makes it stronger than other enclaves like the military which is susceptible to attempted destruction through institutional reform.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

The persistence of the enclaves has left a massive effect on the democratic course of Pakistan. They have also undermined the rights of the minorities, as evident in constitutional preclusions and legal discriminations on the non-Muslims and fringe groups. Second they have undermined parliamentary sovereignty by relegating elected value and power and reinforcing it over clerical interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. Third, they have eroded pluralism by failing to respect open debate on local religion-state relations branding dissenters as un-Islamic or disloyal. Taken together, these influences have hindered the development of a democratized form of governance in Pakistan which is still mired in a state of hybridism.

In conclusion, religious enclaves in Pakistan show how such practices of authoritarianism could have remained present and accepted even under democracy. In contrast to predation produced by other authoritarian enclaves, their strength lies both in the institutional version as well as in the ideology based appeal to beliefs and values that were on the minds of the society. This duality has made them particularly difficult to shift and hence the democratic deprivation in Pakistan can never be ended.

CONCLUSION

The inability to consolidate democracy evinced by the resilient religious authoritarian enclaves within the Pakistani democratic framework is juxtaposed by the fact that the nation was born with the true promise of democracy. This paper has reflected how the religious enclaves came up in history, entrenched in the constitution and further shored up by the authoritarian leadership like General Zia-ul-Haq, in the name of the Islamization project. It has further demonstrated the impact that these enclaves still had in affecting democratic governments and how Pakistan has grown to be a hybrid regime, and not the fully consolidated democracy.

The evidence points to three important dynamics. First, the Objectives Resolution and the trends evidenced in the subsequent constitutional provisions institutionalized the influence of the religious authority in the state legal and political fabric. This made the difference between the sovereignty of the people and the sovereignty of God indistinct, providing clerical elites with long-term influence on political processes. Second, the union between the army and religions especially under the regime of Zia-ul-Haq, formed a

symbiotic relation where the religious enclaves took root as an ideological and political force. Third, the religious enclaves in which politics is embedded remained influential even in civilian democratic times, to the detriment of pluralism, minority rights and parliamentary sovereignty.

These conclusions prove the main idea of the article: that the religious enclave is the long-term bastion of authoritarianism that is destructive towards Pakistani democratic consolidation. Military or feudal enclaves base their claims almost exclusively on coercion, and on elite prerogative; religious enclaves, by contrast, can appeal to the ideological weight of deeply held narratives. By posing as the defenders of Islamic authenticity, these enclaves have effectively limited democratic practices, disenfranchised secular options and put a straitjacket on political pluralism.

The consequence to the democracy of Pakistan seem to be overwhelming. Failure by the state to demonstrate a stronger delinkage between religion and politics means that religious enclaves are likely to remain an impediment to democratization. A number of policy recommendations are deduced out of this analysis. Constitutional amendments should target at reinstating parliamentary supremacy by means of reconsidering the provisions that imply the subordination of parliament to religious power. Second, civil society must help reform civic education and pluralist values upholding the distortion of secularism as being anti-religious. Third, democratic governments need to avoid the temptation of using religion as a means to secure short-term legitimacy since the same approach empowers the authoritarian bastions in the end.

In sum, religious authoritarian enclaves persisted long after the civil war because democratization is a greater difficulty in general in postcolonial states that are characterized by the historical legacies, contending ideologies and institutional fragilities. As the experience in Pakistan shows, it is impossible to have democracy under the conditions where the religious authority functions as an autonomous enclave, not subjected to the democratic will. To shrug off its hybrid regime tag, Pakistan needs to face this contradiction frontally by reaffirming the very pluralism, equality, and popular sovereignty that pacify life that it had postulated in its founding vision. It is only then that the state should wish to get a consolidated democracy which serves its people regardless of faith or ideology.

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