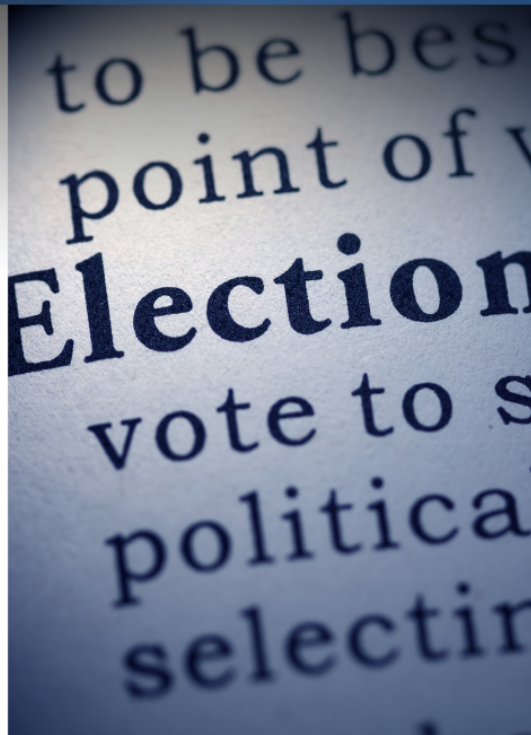


## A hand is shown inserting a white ballot paper into a slot on top of a metallic ballot box. The box is dark and has large, bold Chinese characters '投票' (Vote) printed on its side. The scene is dimly lit, focusing on the action of casting a ballot.



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## Executive Summary

Pakistan is grappling with a persistent democratic deficit, rooted in a long-standing disconnect between the state and its citizens. This estrangement has been shaped by a history of interrupted democratic transitions, elite capture of power, judicial and military overreach, and a chronic failure of state institutions to deliver basic services. As trust in democratic governance erodes, disillusionment grows, which is manifested in declining voter turnout, widespread civic apathy, and increasing susceptibility to populist and authoritarian alternatives. Alarmingly, support for democracy has dropped from 40 percent in 2007 to just 17 percent in 2024 (Gallup, 2024), with 70 percent of Pakistanis expressing mistrust in the electoral process on the eve of the last general election. For many, the constitution is perceived not as a living contract that secures their rights, but as an abstract and elite-centric legal document.

This democratic decay is reinforced by widespread constitutional illiteracy and weak civic education. Most citizens, especially youth, women, rural residents, and marginalized groups, lack basic awareness of their constitutional rights and the mechanisms available to hold state institutions accountable. Schools and universities rarely teach civic engagement or critical thinking; media coverage prioritizes sensationalism over rights-based narratives; and legal empowerment remains largely inaccessible to the ordinary citizen. Civic education programs launched post-18th Amendment (2010) failed to achieve sustainable institutional integration, and efforts have remained sporadic, focusing on isolated publications or training sessions without systemic follow-through.

The proposed solution is a bold, multi-pronged initiative to institutionalize constitutional literacy in Pakistan. This effort must be grounded in comprehensive curriculum reform, inclusive civic engagement, and a national reimagining of the Constitution as a living social contract. Drawing on successful global models, from India's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks and Samvidhan Radio, to Kenya's integrated civic education programs, Colombia's post-conflict peace curriculum, and Tunisia's grassroots constitutional dialogues, Pakistan can craft its own path forward. These models underscore the importance of embedding civic learning not only in educational institutions but also in communities, digital spaces, and governance institutions.

To catalyze this transformation, the brief recommends a set of concrete policy actions:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Integrate rights-based, age-appropriate civic education into all levels of schooling, encouraging critical thinking and connecting constitutional principles to students' lived experiences. Emphasize democratic institutions, the rule of law, and local governance.
2. **Youth-Centered Programs:** Launch interactive radio, digital platforms, and mock civic exercises in collaboration with universities, election bodies, and civil society, turning passive students into informed participants in governance.
3. **Community and Media Engagement:** Leverage local cultural platforms, melas, and storytelling to reach underrepresented groups. Incentivize rights-based programming in mainstream and regional media. Train journalists in constitutional literacy to improve public discourse.
4. **Civil Service and Teacher Training:** Reform pre-service and in-service training to include participatory civic education methodologies and constitutional values. Civil servants should be sensitized to constitutional obligations related to transparency, service delivery, and rights protection.

In essence, constitutional literacy is not merely a pedagogical objective; it is a democratic imperative. For Pakistan to address its democratic crisis and renew its social contract, the state must empower its citizens with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to understand, defend, and demand their constitutional rights. Only then can public trust be restored and a resilient, inclusive democracy be realized.

## Introduction

Since its inception, Pakistan has faced a persistent democratic deficit. Throughout its history, democratic governance and a meaningful connection between citizens and the state have remained elusive. When such a disconnect persists, citizens become disengaged and indifferent toward the state<sup>1</sup> (Sufi, 2024). In the absence of this connectedness, the state loses its foundation and drifts into the uncertain waters of instability. What ultimately binds a state together is its social contract with the people, particularly the effective fulfillment of the promises embedded within that contract.

In Pakistan's case, the state has struggled to build this foundational trust with its citizens. In fact, one could argue that the state has never fully won the trust of its people except in moments of national crises such as natural disasters or wars. Since its inception, Pakistan has faced recurring governance crises rooted in unresolved questions of state structure, political legitimacy, and civil-military imbalance. For the first 24 years, the country struggled to define its relationship with its eastern wing, i.e., East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

It took seven years for the new dominion to adopt its first constitution in 1956, which was soon abrogated by the military in 1958. A new constitution introduced in 1962 established a presidential system under military rule, but it too collapsed within seven years. While some economic progress was made in the early decades, its benefits failed to trickle down to the masses. A nationwide protest movement eventually ousted the first military regime, but another military ruler took over. The failure of political reconciliation between East and West Pakistan led to a civil war and the secession of the eastern wing in 1971.

In the aftermath, West Pakistan which became the whole of Pakistan, attempted to rebuild through nationalization of the economy and an infrastructure for public service delivery. A consensus constitution was adopted in 1973, accompanied by governance reforms, but these efforts were again derailed by a military coup in 1977. The new regime altered the constitution, entrenched a moneyed elite in politics, and relied heavily on coercion. Democratic rule was restored in 1988, but elected governments over the next decade were mired in corruption allegations and power struggles with the military. A fourth military takeover occurred in 1999, followed by a period of controlled democracy from 2002 to 2008. This era was marked by mounting grievances in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the spread of militancy, and widespread terrorism. Although democracy was formally restored in 2008, governance remained fragile.

Civilian governments between 2008 and 2018 made some progress, such as constitutional reforms, food security initiatives, and moderate economic growth, but failed to fully gain public trust, as the judiciary began asserting a role reminiscent of military interference. In 2018, a so-called hybrid regime emerged, with the democratically elected government openly claiming to work in close coordination with the military leadership. However, this partnership soon unraveled, and a new hybrid arrangement took shape amid serious allegations of electoral fraud and coercion of political parties. The period of hybrid regimes has seen severe inflation, political instability, coercion, and a decline in living standards. While recent signs of economic recovery offer some hope, the trust of the people in the state remains deeply eroded.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1857840>

Only 36 percent of Pakistanis have trust in Parliament (Gallup, 2025)<sup>2</sup>. Iqbal (2024) acknowledges the widening trust deficit between citizens and key state institutions. He notes a declining public perception of trust in institutions such as the judiciary, the Election Commission, law enforcement agencies, and other state bodies. This erosion of trust is attributed to a history of weak democratic continuity, judicial overreach, civil-military imbalance, and poor service delivery<sup>3</sup>.

The mistrust over institutions translates into distrust over democracy as a system. As per Gallup's periodic surveys, 40 percent of Pakistanis believed democracy was the best system of governance in 2007. By 2009, the ratio dropped to 36 percent, in 2011 it further dipped to 27 percent, to recover to 40 percent in 2014, dropping again to 20 percent in 2023 and 17 percent in 2024<sup>4</sup>. A survey that appeared just two days before the general elections 2024 showed that 70 percent of Pakistanis lack trust in the electoral system<sup>5</sup>.

While issues like civil-military relations and judicial overreach often dominate public discourse, poor service delivery remains an underexplored area. For most citizens, service delivery is their primary, often sole, point of interaction with the state, and it is here that much of the everyday mistrust is rooted.

Although mistrust in the state among certain ethnic, religious, indigenous, and linguistic groups is often linked to broader political grievances, such as inequitable access to resources, underrepresentation, limited political power, or demographic shifts, low trust is also evident in regions like northern and central Punjab, central Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and urban Sindh that make the mainstream Pakistan. In these areas, where such macro-political issues are less pronounced, the primary driver of mistrust remains inadequate service delivery. All forms of governments, democratic, military, and hybrid, have disappointed the masses on the service delivery front. Corruption, nepotism, client-patron infrastructure, elite capture of resources, and other problems keep service delivery flawed, erratic, and inefficient, contributing to the frustrations of a common person.

## Lack of Empowered and Informed Citizenry

Democracy is fundamentally rooted in the active participation of informed and empowered citizens, not just the decisions and dominance of political elites. In Pakistan, however, democracy has largely remained confined to a narrow coalition of elites who monopolize not only state resources but also access to information and knowledge. This elite capture of the political system extends beyond financial and institutional power, it includes the control of narratives, legal understanding, and procedural knowledge that should be widely accessible to the public (Zaidi, 2023)<sup>6</sup>. As a result, the wider citizenry remains disengaged from democratic processes, often viewing them as distant, corrupt, and ineffective. Public frustration in Pakistan with inefficiency, bureaucratic red tape, nepotism, and corruption has created a vacuum where disinformation and populist rhetoric thrive. Because state institutions do little to demystify democratic structures or proactively engage with citizens, the people are left to interpret the political system through the lens of lived frustration and manipulated narratives. This situation leads to growing distrust of parliamentary democracy and a dangerous longing for abrupt, extra-constitutional

<sup>2</sup> <https://gallup.com.pk/post/38282>

<sup>3</sup> [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/6798994f1722d\\_144.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/6798994f1722d_144.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gallup.com.pk/post/37574>

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/609752/pakistanis-discontent-reaches-record-high-election.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1142649-elections-and-elitism>



change. Ironically, such disruptions only serve to further entrench elite power, as populist or authoritarian alternatives often sideline democratic safeguards altogether.

The lack of civic education and the absence of public-facing institutional transparency means that people are not equipped to understand or question the legal, constitutional, and procedural frameworks of governance. Information about how democracy is supposed to function through parliamentary checks, citizen oversight, rights-based governance is either withheld, inaccessible, or buried in technical jargon. Instead of fostering ownership, the system distances people from the very tools that could empower them. Consequently, constitutional democracy is frequently framed as part of the problem rather than the protective mechanism it actually offers against abuse of power. Sabzwari (2025) calls it democracy in name and oligarchy in practice<sup>7</sup>.

This environment creates fertile ground for elite manipulation. As misinformation and disillusionment spread, populist leaders and ideological extremists present themselves as alternatives to a "failed system," when in fact they often reinforce the same undemocratic structures they criticize. These actors feed off frustration while avoiding structural reform, deepening the crisis rather than resolving it. The illusion of change becomes a tool in the hands of the powerful, deflecting scrutiny and consolidating control.

A functioning democracy demands not only elections but also a citizenry that understands its rights, can hold institutions accountable, and feels a sense of ownership in governance. The state has a responsibility to democratize information, promote civic education, and create inclusive platforms for public engagement. Unless people reclaim the democratic system by knowing how it works, what it protects, and how it can be reformed, it will remain vulnerable to elite capture, manipulation, and eventual erosion. Empowered citizens, not just powerful politicians, are the cornerstone of any resilient democracy.

## Nonexistent Constitutional Awareness

The constitution is not merely a legal document, it is the foundational contract between citizens and the state, defining their rights, duties, and the limits of power. In Pakistan, however, there is a significant lack of constitutional literacy, education, and realization of the constitution's role in everyday governance. A study of highly educated Pakistanis revealed that most could not name a single right or clause from the constitution, and showed little interest in significant amendments like the 18th Amendment<sup>8</sup> (Nadeem, 2012). This disconnect is not incidental; it reflects a deepening democratic deficit where citizens are increasingly alienated from the political system. As noted above, surveys repeatedly show widespread public mistrust of state institutions and dwindling support for democratic processes. This mistrust is, in part, a direct consequence of the public's unfamiliarity with constitutional guarantees and the mechanisms available to hold institutions accountable. When people are unaware of the tools that protect their freedoms, they are less likely to demand or defend them.

Ironically, this constitutional detachment has emerged in a country that inherited one of the richest traditions of constitutional debate in South Asia. During British colonial rule, both the Indian National

<sup>7</sup> <https://thefridaytimes.com/03-Mar-2025/democracy-in-name-oligarchy-in-practice-understanding-the-evolution-of-politics-in-pakistan>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/ijird\\_ojs/article/view/133264](https://www.internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/ijird_ojs/article/view/133264)



Congress and the All-India Muslim League engaged in extensive negotiations over how the rights of individuals and communities could be safeguarded through constitutional arrangements under self-rule. Following independence, Pakistan's early political and intellectual landscape was shaped by vigorous debates over representation, parity between East and West Pakistan, and the federal distribution of power. These discussions laid the groundwork for the 1973 Constitution — a hard-won consensus meant to stabilize the federation and enshrine democratic principles. Yet, rather than becoming the backbone of democratic culture, the constitution slowly receded into abstraction.

This apathy toward the Constitution did not arise in a vacuum. Decades of military rule, legal distortions, and authoritarian experiments have gradually deprived the constitution of its sanctity in public consciousness. Deliberate efforts by anti-democratic forces to delegitimize constitutional governance — coupled with the failure of elected governments to uphold democratic ideals — have left citizens with little faith in constitutionalism. Today, the Constitution is often viewed as just another bureaucratic text rather than a living, empowering social contract. While Pakistan's parliament restored constitutional supremacy in 2010 and introduced treason penalties for overthrowing the constitution, governments have routinely sidestepped these safeguards. Government efforts at civic education remain limited, and the constitution is seldom referenced in public protests or political debates<sup>9</sup> (CCEP, 2018).

This disengagement has gravely undermined civic participation, leaving citizens disempowered and unable to effectively question or resist institutional overreach.

## Gap Analysis

Pakistan faces a multifaceted civic crisis resulting in democratic deficits, widespread constitutional illiteracy, steep voter apathy, weak civic participation, legal undermining by authorities, institutional mistrust, and entrenched elite control. Citizens have yet to internalize in full that if laws fail to address rights-based issues, they can still claim rights and seek protection, invoking guarantees available to them in the constitution.

### Low Civic/Constitutional Awareness among Youth, Rural Population, and Marginalized Groups:

Pakistan's youth, especially those in rural and marginalized communities, exhibit low civic and constitutional literacy. According to a PILDAT survey in 2022, youth apathy often stems from a lack of knowledge about the voting process, candidate platforms, and the political system — many feel their vote does not carry weight and dismiss party manifestos as irrelevant to their lives<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, educational deficits compound the issue with an overall literacy rate of around 61 percent, and as low as 38 percent for rural women, many citizens struggle even to access written public information, leaving them dependent on word-of-mouth or intermediaries.

In rural areas, political ignorance is deeply entrenched. A qualitative study of rural dwellers in Pakistan found that the vast majority were unaware of how the government functions, the significance of their votes, or how public programs might benefit them. Naveed (2017) argues that many rural voters cast

<sup>9</sup> <https://civiceducation.org/programs/constitutional-literacy-campaign/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://pildat.org/youth1/youth-monitor-december-2022>

votes based on clan loyalty or to avoid offending local elites — often without understanding the candidates’ policies or constitutional provisions<sup>11</sup>.

## Voter Apathy

Voter turnout in Pakistan has been gradually declining, signaling disengagement. Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) data indicates that turnout dropped from 55.5 percent in 2013 to 48 percent in 2024 — the lowest in over two decades<sup>12</sup>. Urban areas saw especially steep declines, with turnout at just 43.8 percent in 2024, compared to 50.1 percent in rural regions. The number of polling stations with extremely low participation rose six folds between 2018 and 2024, revealing growing disillusionment with the electoral process. Youth participation is particularly alarming. Despite comprising nearly 44 percent of registered voters, youth turnout averaged just around 31 percent over the past eight elections, lagging roughly 13 percentage points behind the national average<sup>13</sup> (Asma, 2024). Anees (2023) cites focus groups revealing that young Pakistanis often feel their vote does not matter and that politicians ignore their concerns<sup>14</sup>.

## Poor Civic Engagement

Poor civic engagement extends beyond elections. Limited access to public institutions — due to physical remoteness, illiteracy, or social barriers — prevents citizens, particularly from marginalized groups, from participating in forums related to service delivery, budgeting, or local decision-making. Women, youth, rural poor, and disabled individuals frequently face discrimination or exclusion in civic spaces, often relying on local power brokers rather than formal institutions to voice concerns. Digital engagement and youth mobilization remain weak despite Pakistan’s large young demographic. Public participation in development planning by local institutions, public hearings conducted by legislative bodies, and budget consultations at national, provincial, and local levels could play a vital role in building public trust and strengthening governance mechanisms. A truly functional parliamentary democracy remains open and creates avenues for citizen engagement, particularly for youth. When citizens are well-informed about legislative processes and the performance of their elected representatives, they are more likely to engage actively and participate meaningfully, thereby reducing political apathy and mistrust in state institutions.

## Misuse of Laws by Authorities: Erosion of Trust in Institutions

Institutional overreach correlates with eroded trust in democratic bodies. Polling experts note that voters perceive that election outcomes are preordained, regardless of which party wins, with elites and establishment forces manipulating results. Anees (2023) argues that with none of Pakistan’s 29 prime ministers completing full terms, political instability and frequent military interventions reinforce public cynicism<sup>15</sup>. As voters increasingly dissociate from democratic institutions — perceiving them as corrupt, inaccessible, or powerless — the foundation of constitutional governance is further weakened.

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331952886\\_Political\\_ignorance\\_and\\_voting\\_participation\\_of\\_rural\\_dwellers\\_in\\_Pakistan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331952886_Political_ignorance_and_voting_participation_of_rural_dwellers_in_Pakistan)

<sup>12</sup> [https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FAFEN\\_Brief-on-Assessing-Demographic-and-Gender-Turnout-Dynamics.pdf](https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FAFEN_Brief-on-Assessing-Demographic-and-Gender-Turnout-Dynamics.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1153934-profiling-the-electorate>

<sup>14</sup> <https://thediomat.com/2023/12/why-do-half-of-pakistans-voters-stay-away-from-the-polls/>

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

## Elite Capture & Centralization of Power

Elite capture exacerbates these democratic deficits. Rural populations often remain under the influence of feudal lords or *biradari* networks who manipulate vote choices, fortified through low education, media control, and economic dependency. Political parties are often family-controlled dynastic entities that offer little genuine youth representation. Recent data shows youth under 35 constituted just 17 percent of PTI candidates, 13 percent of PML-N, and 23 percent of PPP<sup>16</sup> (*ibid*). Centralized elite power not only undermines voter agency but also discourages civic mobilization. The elite-controlled bureaucracy — and often military — retains ultimate authority, diminishing the relevance of constitutional provisions. Communities reliant on patronage and informal dispute resolution avoid formal civic channels, reinforcing a parallel system of control that sidelines formal governance. In such an environment, civic disillusionment is not just a consequence — it is systematically perpetuated and used to consolidate elite power.

## Why Constitutional Literacy Matters?

Constitutional literacy forms the backbone of democratic governance, grounding the relationship between citizens and the state in a shared understanding of rights, duties, and institutional accountability. In Pakistan, this literacy is weak — people often see the constitution as a distant legal artifact rather than a living covenant that shapes daily governance. When citizens lack knowledge of their constitutional entitlements, they cannot adequately hold state institutions accountable or challenge rights violations. This erodes the democratic contract and allows elite capture to flourish unchecked.

## The Constitution as a Living Social Contract – Not Just a Legal Document

A truly functional democracy requires the constitution to be alive in public consciousness, as a social compact that resonates in everyday life. In Pakistan, the legal text often remains confined to courtrooms, while the broader populace remains disconnected. Even with policy directives — such as the 2009 Education Policy advocating for fundamental-rights-focused curricula — implementation remains inconsistent. Constitutional debates, once woven into the national ethos, have faded, reducing the constitution to a theoretical symbol and weakening the public’s ability to connect it to their lived realities.

## Rights-Based Governance & Legal Empowerment

Awareness of rights catalyzes active citizenship. Constitutions’ Article 184 and 199 give citizens the power to petition higher Courts for fundamental rights’ enforcement — yet most are unaware of this avenue, rendering the tool largely ineffective as it is rarely used for citizens to claim their rights. However, this original jurisdiction of the courts is excessively used by national leaders of political parties in the opposition and the government for their own gains. When citizens understand their rights, they can challenge unjust laws or demand better public services, transforming passive subjects into active participants in governance. Albeit few, there have been successful rights-based petitions by social activists to claim their economic, environmental, and social rights over the past four decades. The use of public interest litigations (PIL) is a difficult route for citizens to claim their rights. Abbas (2021) argues that

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

there has been a growing concern in Pakistan's legal circles about how public interest litigation can help improve access to justice in the face of a massive backlog of cases, rampant corruption in the public sector, serious threats to the independence of the judiciary, and bureaucratic red-tape culture<sup>17</sup>.

Right to Information in the federation and provinces as well as Right to Basic Services in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, are directly linked with citizens' daily lives, but use of such rights is also not common due to sheer lack of awareness.

## How Literacy Strengthens Democratic Participation?

Constitutional education equips citizens to make informed electoral choices rather than follow patronage networks. Studies show that civic learning fosters critical thinking and higher rates of political engagement. In Pakistan, however, the disconnect persists despite curricular references, and citizens remain unable to connect constitutional principles to voting or advocacy practices. Civic education also helps citizens know how to hold public offices and officials accountable in-between two elections through citizen oversight of state and performance of public institutions.

### Rule of Law

A society whose citizens know and demand constitutional compliance has stronger rule-of-law institutions. Pakistan's courts affirmed this principle by declaring military governments' actions unconstitutional during the 2007 emergency, asserting the primacy of constitutional order. However, systemic disregard for judicial rulings — often due to citizens' ignorance of their legal recourse — perpetuates executive overreach and weakens institutional integrity.

### Social Cohesion in Diverse Communities

Constitutional literacy fosters unity by embedding shared values across ethnic, regional, and religious divisions. Rights like equality before the law and freedom of religion can, when understood, serve as building blocks for an inclusive national identity. Pakistani civil-society institutions attempt to bridge divides by promoting these principles among marginalized groups. However, their reach remains limited. Scaling constitutional education can strengthen trust across diverse communities, reinforcing national cohesion rooted in humane values.

Constitutional literacy is not optional — it is essential. It breathes life into the constitution, transforming it from a legal document into a powerful civic tool. Awareness of constitutional rights unlocks democratic participation, legal empowerment, rule-of-law adherence, and social unity. Pakistan's institutional reforms and judicial rulings provide a foundation, but without a mass civic education effort — incorporating schools, media, civil society, and public institutions — the promise of constitutional democracy remains unfulfilled. Citizens must be equipped to see the constitution as their mirror and shield if Pakistan's democracy is to strengthen and endure.

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<sup>17</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349877649\\_The\\_Dynamics\\_of\\_Public\\_Interest\\_Litigation\\_PIL\\_in\\_the\\_Perspective\\_of\\_Adversarial\\_Legal\\_System\\_of\\_Pakistan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349877649_The_Dynamics_of_Public_Interest_Litigation_PIL_in_the_Perspective_of_Adversarial_Legal_System_of_Pakistan)



## Gaps in Current Education and Public Discourse

### Absence of Civic Education in Educational Institutions

Pakistan's formal education system largely fails to impart meaningful civic or constitutional education. Studies have shown that classrooms emphasize rote learning and nationalistic indoctrination rather than critical thinking or practical governance knowledge. For instance, a 2014 Dawn report highlighted that 75 percent of participants in a sample of scholars from the Higher Education Commission (HEC) received no civic education at any level, and 88 percent could not recall any civic teacher — a demonstration of why even elite graduates often lack fundamental citizenship awareness<sup>18</sup> (Ahmed et al, 2023).

A 2018 content analysis of Punjab's secondary-level curriculum found that civic education was not comprehensively integrated, and only a minority of civic dimensions — such as political literacy or critical thinking — were present in textbooks. Further research into Pakistan Studies confirmed that just 5 percent of classroom time is devoted to political education, with only token mentions of basic rights such as freedom of speech or privacy<sup>19</sup> (Iqbal, et al., 2024).

Elite-school history textbooks also reinforce memorization over critical thinking and civic engagement, in stark contrast to international curricula that encourage collaboration, debate, and deeper political participation<sup>20</sup> (Rauf, 2024). The result is a generation that recognizes state narratives and religious-nationalist tropes but is unable to question authority, participate in democratic life, or apply constitutional rights in everyday civic spaces.

Pakistan's approach to civic and constitutional education has been inconsistent, often influenced by political shifts and military interventions. While national elites have historically seen civic education as a tool to cultivate patriotic citizens and promote a unified national identity<sup>21</sup> (Saigol, 2023), genuine efforts to promote constitutional literacy have been sporadic. Notable moments include Benazir Bhutto's educational reforms in 1988 and the inclusion of fundamental rights in the 2009 education policy. However, such initiatives were often derailed — either by regime changes or ideological shifts like the recent Single National Curriculum, which emphasizes nationalism and religious ideology over rights-based education and federalism.

Despite isolated parliamentary efforts to engage youth and civil society — such as celebrating the Constitution's golden jubilee after the 2024 elections — constitutional literacy remains low. Civic education is restricted to a few subjects in schools and is largely absent in public universities. Teaching methods remain outdated, and there is little government support for student mentorship in civic matters. Discussions on inclusion, minority rights, and local governance structures are scarce outside of NGO circles, leaving many citizens, especially youth, disillusioned and unaware of how to engage the state or claim their rights.

Beyond deficiencies in curricula, Pakistan's closing of civic spaces in universities deepens democratic illiteracy. Student unions have been banned since 1984, effectively nullifying organized student political

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/civic-education-in-pakistan/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://ijhs.com.pk/index.php/IJHS/article/view/452>

<sup>20</sup> <https://poverty.com.pk/index.php/Journal/article/view/448>

<sup>21</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/097152150301000301>

activity and civic organizing at the grassroots level. While the National Civic Education Commission — established under the NCCE Act, 2018 — mandates civic education in secondary and tertiary institutions, the initiative has been hampered by underfunding, weak pedagogical support, and a shortage of trained teachers<sup>22</sup> (Farooq, 2025). Teachers themselves often rely on outdated, lecture–exam-centered methods and lack both curricular autonomy and training to foster civic critical thinking<sup>23</sup> (Abid, 2022).

This institutional neglect manifests in a lack of experiential learning or democratic habits. Opportunities for student governance, community engagement, or civic simulation are rare to nonexistent. Without these active-learning modalities, citizens remain detached. They remain aware of civic forms in theory but are unable to translate that into informed action.

## Limited Space in Media and Public Discourse for Rights-Based Narratives

The deficit in formal civic education is compounded by a mainstream media environment that offers scant space for rights-based discourse. Major television networks and newspapers rarely foreground constitutional rights, judicial accountability, or citizen empowerment, favoring sensationalist or establishment-centered narratives. This media bias reinforces central state narratives and marginalizes local voices, dissent, and community-level civic concerns, deepening a disconnect between media coverage and grassroots realities.

Social media platforms, though potentially democratizing, are frequently dominated by misinformation, hate speech, and polarization. Academic studies reveal that misinformation spreads readily among digital users with low literacy, while personalized media interventions are more effective than generic campaigns. In this environment, rights-based journalism and inclusive public discourse struggle to reach citizens, especially those in rural or marginalized regions. Media, which could bridge this gap, largely fails to promote civic education. Commercial interests and political pressures result in coverage focused on sensationalism and partisan politics, with minimal attention to rights-based narratives. Civic issues like press freedom, minority rights, and gender justice are either sidelined or superficially covered during token observances like Human Rights Day. Journalists often lack constitutional knowledge and, due to censorship pressures, avoid critical engagement with legal reforms or human rights violations.

The cumulative effect of curriculum gaps, lack of civic institutions, and media distortion is a citizenry that is disengaged and under-informed. Citizens often default to patronage networks, religious identities, or provincial affiliations when casting votes or seeking legal recourse. They remain unaware of constitutional protections like Article 199, which allows High Court petitions for fundamental rights enforcement, even though these mechanisms could directly empower them. As a result, authority remains uncontested, and corruption or rights violations go unchecked.

This environment also deepens social fragmentation. Education and public discourse that emphasize religious or nationalist mythology over critical citizenship marginalize plural voices and erode social cohesion. Biased textbooks foster intolerance toward minorities, and public media's reluctance to cover

<sup>22</sup> <https://islamabadpost.com.pk/understanding-civic-education-a-path-to-active-citizenship-in-pakistan/#:~:text=By%20integrating%20civic%20education%20into,become%20active%20participants%20in%20society.>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.pakistangulfeconomist.com/2022/08/29/education-in-pakistan-problems-challenges-and-perspectives/>

community grievances reinforces a deficit of collective empathy and democratic solidarity across Pakistan's diverse society.

## Constitutional Literacy Efforts by State

After some unsuccessful attempts at popularizing constitutional literacy in the late 1980s and 1990s — most notably during Benazir Bhutto's short-lived government in 1988–90 — the state began to take the task more seriously following the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. The amendment marked a turning point in Pakistan's democratic trajectory by strengthening parliamentary supremacy and devolving powers to the provinces, which necessitated greater public understanding of constitutional principles. In response, a large-scale civic education program was launched, producing a wealth of educational materials including booklets, handbooks, and curricula modules. These resources were intended to inform citizens — especially youth — about their constitutional rights, democratic institutions, and avenues for civic participation. Despite this progress, the initiative faced significant hurdles in achieving long-term institutional integration, particularly in embedding civic and constitutional literacy into school and university curricula. Much of the effort remained focused on one-off publications and in-person training workshops, often limited in reach and sustainability. Meanwhile, digital platforms, media, and academic institutions — despite their broad influence — remained underutilized in reinforcing constitutional awareness. Going forward, these sectors can play a far more strategic and sustained role in mainstreaming constitutional discourse, making it accessible, engaging, and relevant to Pakistan's diverse citizenry.

## Regional & Global Lessons

### India's NCERT Civic Textbooks and Samvidhan Radio

India's NCERT offers a model of civic education that shapes young citizens' values, attitudes, and civic competencies. Beginning in Grade 6, NCERT curricula introduce constitutional concepts — liberty, equality, fraternity — alongside practical governance structures like local Panchayats and federal institutions. Crucially, they promote discussion, reflection, and inclusivity, explicitly engaging with caste, gender, and religious diversity. This moves beyond rote memorization and encourages students to view the constitution as a living document relevant to daily life, not merely legalese.

Adding to this effort, India's "Samvidhan Radio," launched around India's 75th Constitution Day, offers a year-long series of programs on constitutional rights, landmark cases, and civic participation. Broadcasted on All India Radio and university channels, it targets broad audiences — from students to rural villagers — reinforcing classroom learning through stories, debates, and accessible explanations. Both initiatives show that combining formal curricula with mass education tools like radio can deepen civic awareness far beyond classroom walls. Pakistan could replicate this multi-pronged model to reinforce constitutional learning.

### Kenya's Post-2010 Constitution Civic Reforms

Kenya's 2010 Constitution, often referred to as the "People's Constitution," launched extensive civic education reforms. Under the National Civic Education Programme (2000–2010), Uraia Trust and other NGOs ran nationwide campaigns before and after the referendum. After 2010, the government created



the Kenya National Integrated Civic Education Programme (K-NICE) to standardize and institutionalize civic learning in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and the curriculum authority. A 21-session civic curriculum was developed and deployed across schools and community forums<sup>24</sup>.

Kenya also strengthened institutional backing for constitutionalism. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), established under the constitution, assumed voter education duties and worked closely with civic bodies. Independent oversight bodies like the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) and a strengthened judiciary also emerged, supported by civic outreach. These measures boosted public trust — Gallup polls showed confidence in the judiciary rose from 27 percent in 2009 to 61 percent in 2013<sup>25</sup>. Kenya thus illustrates how constitution-led civic education, when embedded in institutional redesign and delivered through civil society partnerships, can foster legal empowerment, voter engagement, and national confidence.

## Tunisia's Post-Arab Spring Constitutional Engagement

Following the overthrow of Ben Ali, Tunisia's democratic transition featured broad civic engagement in constitutional debates. Notably, student organizations, unions (e.g. UGTT), and lawyers hosted public "Constitutional Sit-ins" like those in the Casbah, where professors held lectures on governance models in open-air forums. This grassroots dialogue helped build public ownership of the 2014 Constitution.

Additionally, the National Dialogue Quartet — comprising civil society actors — mediated contentious issues within the Constituent Assembly, showcasing how civic groups can guide constitutional outcomes<sup>26</sup>. However, Tunisia's later slide toward authoritarianism under President Saied underscores a vital lesson: civic literacy must be sustained, not just launched. Without ongoing education and institutional reinforcement, public awareness may not prevent democratic backsliding.<sup>27</sup>

## Colombia's Civic Education after the Peace Accord

In the aftermath of a decades-long internal conflict, Colombia's 2016 peace accord with the FARC rebel group emphasized transitional justice, reconciliation, and democratic reintegration. Recognizing the urgent need to rebuild trust in democratic institutions and promote civic responsibility, the Colombian Ministry of Education introduced a revised national curriculum that placed significant focus on civic coexistence, democratic participation, human rights, and peace education (UNESCO, 2017).

The "Cátedra de la Paz" (Chair for Peace) was made mandatory in schools through Law 1732 of 2014. It taught students about non-violence, conflict resolution, respect for diversity, and active citizenship. The program was deeply localized — schools and teachers were encouraged to adapt it to regional contexts and histories of violence. More importantly, these lessons were accompanied by training programs for educators, enabling them to manage sensitive dialogues and link civic learning with everyday life and historical memory.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/partner/nece/505385/citizenship-education-in-kenya/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/kenya/2017-report/economy/moving-forward-a-new-constitution-has-ushered-in-an-era-of-political-change>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2012/010/article-A001-en.xml?utm>

<sup>27</sup> <https://time.com/6089825/tunisia-democracy-in-jeopardy/>



Media and civil society also supported the peace curriculum with participatory storytelling initiatives. For instance, national TV channels aired educational documentaries and testimonial programs to promote transitional justice and civic dialogue.

## Key Lessons for Pakistan

- **Multi-platform civic education:** Pakistan may adopt the dual approach of India’s NCERT textbooks and Samvidhan Radio. Structured, age-appropriate curricula must be backed by broadcast media content in Urdu and regional languages, reaching mass and remote audiences.
- **Institutional integration:** As in Kenya, Pakistan needs a legal mandate — through bodies like the Ministry of Education and parliamentary commissions — to implement standardized civic education, linked to the Election Commission and judiciary. Learning about voter rights, oversight bodies, and redress mechanisms must be included in national civic strategies.
- **Civil society ownership:** Tunisia’s examples highlight the importance of public dialogue platforms — from student forums to open debates during constitution anniversaries. Pakistan’s civil society and youth organizations need resourcing for sustained engagement, not only during elections or crises.
- **Sustainability and monitoring:** Any curriculum or campaign must include continuous monitoring and institutional safeguard mechanisms. Periodic assessments, teacher retraining, and curricular updates should accompany civic programs to prevent the fate of past policy reversals.
- **Constitution and civic chair at public schools:** Pakistan can draw important lessons from Colombia’s experience. Just as Colombia’s peace curriculum sought to heal divisions and build democratic engagement after conflict, Pakistan — grappling with civic alienation, polarization, and periodic authoritarian disruptions — can use similar approaches to promote non-violent engagement, encourage inclusion of diverse narratives (e.g., minorities, women, and rural communities), and foster civic trust in a post-crisis environment. A “Constitution and Civic Chair” in public schools and colleges, mandated and resourced at the federal level, could mirror the Colombian model.

## Path Forward: Policy Recommendations

### Curriculum Reforms

To embed constitutional literacy as a foundational element of democratic culture in Pakistan, urgent and comprehensive curriculum reform is essential. The National Curriculum must transcend superficial treatments of Pakistan’s political history and instead provide students with a grounded understanding of the Constitution as a living document — one that shapes rights, obligations, and governance structures. Drawing on successful models like India’s NCERT civic textbooks and Colombia’s post-conflict civic education reforms, Pakistan’s curriculum should introduce age-appropriate, rights-based content beginning in early grades and continuing through higher education. These reforms must include concepts like the rule of law, democratic institutions, separation of powers, civic duties, and legal remedies available to citizens under Articles 8 to 28 of the Constitution.

The Single National Curriculum, while a step toward uniformity, currently emphasizes nationalism and religious identity while neglecting pluralism, minority rights, and participatory governance. These omissions must be addressed. Fundamental rights and federalism — including local government structures — should be contextualized within students’ everyday experiences. Moreover, civic textbooks must be redesigned to encourage critical thinking, deliberation, and engagement with diverse viewpoints, rather than rote learning. The 2009 National Education Policy (Policy Action 4) and recent parliamentary consensus offer renewed opportunities to embed constitutional values into mainstream education with clear implementation and accountability mechanisms.

## Youth-Centered Programs

Pakistan’s youth are often excluded from civic processes despite being at the forefront of political activism, especially online. Given that a majority of youth have access to the internet, a mobile application on constitutional literacy — with automated responses to frequently asked questions — could serve as an effective tool for educating young people. Additionally, public service messages, infographics, and audio-visual content should be disseminated through national television and radio to ensure wider outreach and inclusivity. To bridge this gap, youth-centered civic education programs must be expanded beyond formal schooling. Programs similar to India’s Samvidhan Live Radio or Colombia’s “Cátedra de la Paz” can serve as inspiration for Pakistan-specific initiatives. These can include interactive radio broadcasts, podcasts, digital applications, and mobile learning tools tailored to Pakistan’s socio-cultural realities and linguistic diversity.

Higher education institutions should be encouraged to establish Civic Education Societies that partner with election commissions, bar associations, and rights organizations. Youth parliaments, mock constitutional courts, and internship programs with local bodies and civil society organizations can help students relate abstract constitutional principles to their lived reality. Such initiatives would foster a generation that not only understands governance but feels personally invested in protecting democratic norms and institutions.

## Community & Media Engagement

A democratic constitution cannot thrive unless it becomes a document of daily relevance for the common citizen. Community-based education, particularly for rural and marginalized populations, is critical. Local governments, faith leaders, teachers, and civil society actors should be mobilized to conduct constitutional literacy drives through melas, study circles, theatre performances, and local storytelling traditions. These should be designed with inclusion in mind — targeting women, religious minorities, the differently-abled, and those outside the formal education system.

Media’s potential remains underutilized. Mainstream TV and digital outlets must be incentivized, and in some cases mandated, to broadcast civic education content. Public service messages, constitutional explainers, rights-based talk shows, and programming on governance processes — such as how budgets are made, how to file a writ petition, or what role a local councilor plays — should become regular content. Journalists themselves must be trained in constitutional literacy to avoid misinformation during major

events like no-confidence motions or judicial proceedings. The state, media regulators, and press clubs should work together to foster responsible and informed coverage of constitutional issues.

## Civil Service & Teacher/Faculty Training

No civic reform can succeed without equipping educators and administrators with the necessary tools. Teacher training programs must integrate civic education pedagogy that moves beyond textbook instruction toward participatory methods, including debates, simulations, and critical discussions. Public sector teacher recruitment must prioritize an understanding of constitutional and civic values, and incentives should be offered for teachers who successfully implement civic learning in classrooms.

Simultaneously, training of civil servants — particularly at the district level — should include modules on the Constitution’s role in service delivery, transparency, and public accountability. Courses at National School of Public Policy, Civil Services Academy, and provincial training institutes should be revised to emphasize the constitutional duties of state functionaries under Articles 4, 5, 9, 14, and 25. Linking service performance indicators to civic responsiveness — such as grievance redressal or information provision — would reinforce public trust in governance.

In sum, a comprehensive, inclusive and sustained national effort is required to institutionalize constitutional literacy in Pakistan. It must treat the Constitution not as a distant legal manual but as the people’s contract — central to everyday justice, accountability, and dignity. These policy pathways, drawn from global lessons and local gaps, provide a roadmap to make that transformation possible.

## Local-led Literacy Initiatives

Strengthen local-level forums, educational institutions, and informal citizen groups — including community associations, journalists, and civil society organizations (CSOs) — as vehicles for promoting constitutional literacy. These platforms, when supported with appropriate training, materials, and facilitation, can serve as accessible and trusted spaces for dialogue, awareness, and civic action. Empowering them to disseminate knowledge about constitutional rights, democratic processes, and avenues for engagement will help bridge the citizen–state gap, particularly in underserved areas, and foster a more informed, participatory, and resilient democracy.

## Conclusion

Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where democratic survival increasingly depends not just on institutional reform but on public understanding, participation, and ownership of the constitutional order. For too long, the Constitution has been seen as a distant, elite-driven legal document referenced during political crises but rarely lived in the everyday experiences of citizens. This disconnect has created space for populism, misinformation, and authoritarian temptations to thrive. Reversing this trend requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands sustained investment in civic and constitutional literacy that equips citizens, especially youth and marginalized communities, to recognize their rights, hold institutions accountable, and actively shape the democratic process.

The success of democracy does not lie merely in holding elections or changing governments; it lies in cultivating a society where the Constitution is understood, defended, and demanded by its people. If

Pakistan can rise to this challenge by embedding civic learning in schools, empowering communities with knowledge, training educators and civil servants, and making the constitution a visible part of national culture, it can begin to repair the erosion of public trust and lay the foundation for a truly inclusive, participatory democracy. A state that educates its citizens in constitutional values is a state that strengthens itself against both tyranny and decay, and builds a durable future in the hands of its people.



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