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The First Military Regimes In Pakistan (1958–1971): Authoritarian Rule, State Formation And Political Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the specific features of Pakistan's political development from independence in 1947 to the end of the first cycle of military rule in 1971. Drawing on a wide range of historical studies and documentary materials, the research analyses how the "two-nation theory" and the circumstances of partition shaped a fragile state structure marked by weak civil institutions, deep ethno-linguistic and regional cleavages, and chronic political instability. Particular attention is paid to the consolidation of the army as the key political actor and to the establishment of the military regimes of General Muhammad Ayub Khan and General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan. The study evaluates Ayub Khan's model of "basic democracies", the 1962 Constitution and controlled presidential elections, showing how attempts at guided modernisation combined with authoritarian practices intensified social and regional tensions, especially in East Pakistan. The article further explores Yahya Khan's policies, the 1970 general elections, the failure to transfer power to the Awami League, the escalation of internal conflict, the 1971 war with India and the emergence of Bangladesh. The conclusions highlight that military rule did not ensure political stability or national integration, and underline the broader lessons of Pakistan's early statehood for contemporary debates on civil–military relations, democratic governance and nation-building in newly independent and developing states, including those of Central Asia.

Keywords: - Pakistan; military regime; Ayub Khan; Yahya Khan; civil–military relations; authoritarianism; Bangladesh; political development.

INTRODUCTION

The formation of Pakistan in August 1947 marked one of the most dramatic political transformations in the modern history of South Asia. Emerging from the partition of British India, Pakistan was established on the ideological foundation of the "two-nation theory," a political and philosophical argument asserting that Muslims and Hindus constituted two distinct nations with irreconcilable cultural, religious and social identities. The demand for a separate Muslim homeland, articulated by leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and supported by the All-India Muslim League, intensified in the decades

preceding independence, particularly as Muslim elites feared marginalisation in a Hindu-majority independent India. Thus, Pakistan's creation was not only the result of nationalist mobilisation but also a response to perceived threats to communal security and cultural autonomy.

However, the birth of Pakistan also coincided with unprecedented upheaval. Unlike many newly independent nations, Pakistan emerged without a coherent administrative centre, with its founding institutions fragmented and its political elites divided by geography and ideology. The state inherited the enormous challenges of partition: mass population transfers, sectarian violence, economic dislocation, and social fragmentation. Its territorial configuration—comprising West Pakistan and East Pakistan, separated by more than 1,500 kilometres of Indian territory—was inherently unstable and lacked any historical precedent. This unusual geography imposed significant logistical, political and psychological burdens on nation-building from the very outset.

Moreover, Pakistan's early political development was profoundly shaped by the absence of institutional continuity. Many senior bureaucrats remained in India; infrastructure for central governance was incomplete; and the new state lacked experienced political leadership capable of balancing the competing demands of its diverse regions. While the Muslim League had mobilised support for the creation of Pakistan, it had limited experience in governing a sovereign state. As a result, the post-independence political environment was marked by administrative weakness, constitutional deadlock, factionalism and a widening gap between the centre and the provinces.

Within this environment of structural fragility, the armed forces of Pakistan emerged as the most cohesive and disciplined institution. Rooted in the organisational traditions of the British Indian Army, the military retained a strong sense of professionalism, hierarchy and corporate identity at a time when civilian institutions suffered from fragmentation and inefficiency. The military's organisational strength, combined with the political elite's dependence on bureaucratic and military support, gradually positioned the armed forces as arbiters of national stability.

As political instability deepened—characterised by frequent changes of government, allegations of corruption, economic decline, and increasing tensions between East and West Pakistan—the military presented itself as the guardian of national unity and the only force capable of preventing chaos. This self-perception, combined with the political vacuum and the breakdown of parliamentary institutions, set the stage for the first full-scale military takeover in 1958 under General Muhammad Ayub Khan. His regime (1958–1969) introduced controlled political reforms, centralised governance, and an ambitious modernisation agenda, while simultaneously restricting democratic participation and curbing provincial autonomy.

The subsequent military leadership of General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan (1969–1971) inherited an already polarised state. Despite initial promises of political liberalisation and free elections, Yahya Khan's rule culminated in the most profound political and humanitarian crisis in Pakistan's history: the civil conflict in East Pakistan, the 1971 war with India, and the eventual independence of Bangladesh. This period highlighted the failure of military governance to manage regional grievances, accommodate democratic demands, or build a cohesive national identity.

This article provides a comprehensive and multi-dimensional analysis of the first military regimes in Pakistan, exploring their historical origins, political structures and long-term consequences. It examines how the military–bureaucratic nexus became entrenched in state governance, how federal relations deteriorated under centralised rule, and how authoritarian political engineering shaped the trajectory of Pakistan's early statehood. The study argues that military governments did not address Pakistan's foundational challenges—including regional inequality, ethnic fragmentation, and constitutional instability—but instead deepened them through coercive governance, denial of autonomy, and systematic exclusion of democratic forces.

By tracing the evolution of Pakistan's political system from independence to the disintegration of 1971, this article also contributes to broader debates on civil–military relations, authoritarian modernisation, and nation-building in postcolonial states. Pakistan's early experience demonstrates the complexities of state formation in environments marked by institutional weakness and diverse ethnic identities. It also offers relevant lessons for contemporary states—including those in Central Asia—about the limits of military rule, the dangers of centralised governance, and the

critical importance of inclusive political institutions in sustaining national unity and long-term stability.

Early Statehood and Structural Vulnerabilities

The partition of British India in August 1947 produced one of the largest and most violent population movements of the twentieth century. Millions of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs fled across the newly drawn borders amid widespread communal violence, the disintegration of local economies and the collapse of administrative systems. For Pakistan, which emerged abruptly as a sovereign state, partition was not only a moment of triumph for Muslim political aspirations, but also the beginning of an extraordinarily difficult process of state-building. The territorial configuration imposed by the partition plan created a geographically divided country with two wings—West Pakistan and East Pakistan—separated by more than 1,500 kilometres of Indian territory. This arrangement lacked any prior historical precedent, making governance, communication, defence coordination and national integration extremely difficult from the outset.

The new state's administrative and bureaucratic capacity was severely limited. Most senior civil servants and experienced officers of the British Indian bureaucracy chose to remain in India, leaving Pakistan with a shortage of skilled administrators at precisely the moment when it needed them most. Karachi, designated as the federal capital, lacked the infrastructure and institutional resources to manage the responsibilities of a central government. The overwhelming influx of refugees further strained the fragile administrative system, creating immediate challenges in housing, employment and public order. Integrating ethnically and linguistically diverse regions such as Punjab, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province, Balochistan and East Pakistan required political skill that the new leadership could not fully muster.

Economically, the situation was equally fragile. Pakistan did not inherit significant industrial infrastructure, its financial reserves were insufficient, and a substantial portion of its agricultural and irrigation systems had historically been linked to markets and administrative networks located in what became India. The severing of these connections forced Pakistan to restructure its economic base almost from scratch. Meanwhile, the eastern wing, though demographically larger, was economically underdeveloped, which sowed early perceptions of inequality and marginalisation. These structural asymmetries created deep tensions that persisted throughout the early period of statehood.

The earliest political leadership of Pakistan sought to stabilise the new state through parliamentary processes. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, attempted to establish a functioning parliamentary democracy capable of harmonising relations between the centre and the provinces. After his death in 1948, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan continued this effort, but his assassination in 1951 plunged the country into uncertainty. The absence of charismatic and unifying civilian leadership left a vacuum that competing political factions attempted to fill, often at the expense of institutional coherence.

Political parties were weakly organised, lacking ideological clarity, internal democracy and administrative capacity. The Muslim League, which had effectively mobilised the demand for Pakistan, proved unable to transform itself into a stable governing party. Provincial elites frequently prioritised regional interests over national cohesion, and ethnic, linguistic and cultural divisions deepened. Constitutional debates over the distribution of power, the nature of federalism and the status of Islam in the state became increasingly contentious. Attempts to draft the first constitution were repeatedly derailed by political rivalries and disagreements, resulting in prolonged uncertainty.

In this environment of administrative fragility and political fragmentation, the military and civil bureaucracy rapidly emerged as the strongest and most cohesive institutions. Both were deeply influenced by British organisational norms, emphasising discipline, hierarchy and professionalism. Unlike the political elites, the armed forces possessed clear command structures and operational unity. The bureaucracy, too, retained continuity with colonial administrative practices and thus enjoyed greater organisational competence than civilian political bodies.

As political instability intensified—with frequent changes of government, allegations of corruption, and a failure to deliver effective public administration—the perception grew within the military that civilian politicians were incapable of ensuring stability or safeguarding national interests. This belief, combined with the military's corporate identity and expanding institutional confidence, laid the groundwork for the eventual intervention of the armed forces in national politics. By the late 1950s, senior military leaders

viewed themselves not merely as guardians of national security but as legitimate arbiters of political order, convinced that only a disciplined and centralised administration could prevent chaos and disintegration.

Ayub Khan and the Establishment of Military Rule (1958–1969)

By the end of the decade, Pakistan faced severe political and constitutional crises. Governments rose and fell with extraordinary frequency, economic stagnation increased public dissatisfaction, and tensions between East and West Pakistan heightened political instability. President Iskander Mirza, frustrated with parliamentary gridlock, dissolved the first constitution in October 1958, abolished political parties and imposed martial law. He appointed General Muhammad Ayub Khan, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, as Chief Martial Law Administrator. However, within days, the military forced Mirza into exile and concentrated power entirely in Ayub Khan's hands. This event marked the beginning of Pakistan's first full-scale military regime and fundamentally altered the trajectory of the country's political development.

To legitimise his rule, Ayub Khan introduced the Basic Democracies system in 1959, a political framework designed to provide controlled participation while preserving central authority. Under this arrangement, around 80,000 locally elected representatives formed the electoral college responsible for electing the president and members of the national and provincial assemblies. While portrayed as a democratic innovation aimed at strengthening grassroots governance, the system effectively limited political participation to a carefully filtered elite. It gave the regime the appearance of popular support without allowing genuine political pluralism or competitive party politics. Local governments became instruments of central control, reinforcing Ayub Khan's authority over both civilian and administrative institutions.

In 1962, Ayub Khan replaced martial law with a new constitution that formalised a presidential system with extensive executive powers. Political parties, initially banned under martial law, were later permitted but operated under severe constraints. The constitution reinforced central control, curtailed the autonomy of the provinces and institutionalised the dominance of the military–bureaucratic establishment. Parliament had limited authority, and the judiciary lacked the independence required to act as a counterbalance to executive power. While the constitution was promoted as a step toward political stabilisation, it ultimately reinforced authoritarian governance and reduced the space for democratic expression.

Ayub Khan's rule was marked by significant economic growth and ambitious modernisation programmes. His government pursued industrial expansion, agricultural reforms and infrastructural development, often with international support, particularly from the United States and international financial institutions. The private sector grew rapidly, and Pakistan experienced what many described as the "decade of development."

However, the distribution of economic benefits was far from even. While West Pakistan, especially Punjab and Karachi, flourished under state-backed industrialisation, East Pakistan remained relatively underdeveloped. Despite having a larger share of the national population, the eastern wing received proportionately fewer resources, investments and political representation. These disparities fuelled resentment and reinforced the perception that the central government discriminated against Bengalis. As a result, regional nationalism strengthened in East Pakistan, galvanising support for the Awami League's demands for autonomy and more equitable treatment.

The presidential election of 1965 was conducted through the Basic Democracies system and pitted Ayub Khan against Fatima Jinnah, a highly respected political figure and sister of the nation's founder. Although Ayub emerged victorious, the opposition accused the regime of manipulation, further undermining the credibility of his government. That same year, conflict with India escalated into a full-scale war, which ended with the Tashkent Declaration, mediated by the Soviet Union. Many Pakistanis believed that the terms of the agreement did not reflect military gains on the battlefield and saw the settlement as a diplomatic failure. Public dissatisfaction increased, weakening Ayub Khan's legitimacy and fuelling opposition movements across the country.

Mass Protests and Ayub Khan's Resignation

By 1968–1969, Pakistan had entered one of the most turbulent periods of its early history. What began as scattered student demonstrations against rising prices, unemployment and authoritarian political controls quickly broadened into a nationwide movement involving labour unions,

professional associations, intellectual circles and regional political groups. The unrest was not confined to a single region; it simultaneously spread across West Pakistan—in Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Peshawar and Quetta—and throughout East Pakistan, where grievances were already deeply rooted in perceptions of economic exploitation and political marginalisation. Public frustration over the widening gap between rich and poor, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of industrial families, and the evident lack of democratic accountability eroded the legitimacy of Ayub Khan's regime. His government, which had once projected stability and modernisation, now appeared rigid, unresponsive and increasingly disconnected from social realities.

The protests were further intensified by political developments following the 1965 war with India. A significant portion of the public believed that Pakistan had not gained anything meaningful from the post-war negotiations held in Tashkent, and rumours circulated that Ayub Khan had compromised national interests. Opposition parties capitalised on these sentiments, uniting diverse political forces against the government. In East Pakistan, dissatisfaction took a more acute form, as Bengali political leaders argued that the central government had ignored their economic needs and dismissed their aspirations for greater autonomy. The growing wave of civil disobedience, combined with a crisis of confidence within the military establishment, made it increasingly difficult for Ayub Khan to retain control.

By early 1969, the administration was paralysed by a combination of mass unrest, factional disputes and bureaucratic breakdown. Ayub Khan attempted to negotiate with political leaders and even signalled a willingness to review aspects of the 1962 Constitution, but these concessions came too late and were viewed as insufficient. Ultimately, he lost the support of the military hierarchy—the very institution that had sustained his rule since 1958. Recognising that he could no longer govern effectively, Ayub Khan transferred power to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, in March 1969, thus marking the end of Pakistan's first long-lasting military regime.

When Yahya Khan assumed control of the state, he inherited a country beset by political fragmentation, regional tension and deep mistrust between the two wings of the federation. His first act was to impose martial law, dissolve the National Assembly and dismiss provincial governments, claiming that only strong military authority could restore order and prepare the state for a transition to democracy. Yahya Khan reorganised the administrative apparatus and abolished the One Unit scheme—a policy that had earlier amalgamated the western provinces into a single administrative unit and had been a source of considerable resentment among smaller ethnic groups. By dismantling One Unit, he sought to placate provincial leaders and address long-standing grievances, particularly in Sindh, Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province. Despite his authoritarian methods, Yahya Khan presented himself as a transitional figure whose primary role was to guide the country toward genuine democratic elections. He announced a new Legal Framework Order, which set the conditions for the forthcoming electoral process and stipulated that the elected National Assembly would draft a new constitution. This commitment raised hopes in both wings of the country, but nowhere was optimism stronger than in East Pakistan, where political mobilisation reached unprecedented levels. The people of the eastern wing viewed the upcoming elections as the first real opportunity to assert their political weight, which had long been suppressed by centralised rule.

The elections of 1970 were the first direct, nationwide elections held in Pakistan and remain one of the most significant political events in the country's history. The results were dramatic and exposed the deep structural divide that had plagued Pakistan since independence. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won an overwhelming majority of seats in East Pakistan and, consequently, a majority in the National Assembly as a whole. This victory constitutionally entitled the party to form the federal government and determine the structure of the future constitution. In West Pakistan, the Pakistan Peoples Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also emerged as a powerful force, but lacked the numbers required to govern at the national level.

The military leadership and segments of the West Pakistani political elite, however, were unwilling to accept a government led entirely by East Pakistani representatives. They feared that the Awami League's Six-Point Programme, which demanded extensive provincial autonomy, would weaken the central state and potentially lead to the disintegration of Pakistan. As negotiations between Yahya Khan, Mujibur Rahman and Bhutto

stalled, frustration and anger spread across East Pakistan. A broad civil disobedience movement emerged, with millions participating in strikes, demonstrations and symbolic acts of defiance. Administrative authority in the eastern wing effectively collapsed, as government employees, police and even segments of the civil service began aligning themselves with the Awami League.

The situation reached a breaking point on 25 March 1971, when the military launched Operation Searchlight, a large-scale crackdown intended to re-establish control over East Pakistan. The operation targeted political activists, students, intellectuals and ordinary civilians, rapidly escalating into widespread violence. Entire neighbourhoods were cordoned off, universities were raided, and thousands were arrested or killed. The brutality of the campaign generated massive waves of refugees fleeing into neighbouring India, which soon became actively involved in supporting Bengali resistance forces. What began as an internal political crisis transformed into a full-scale civil war, as Bengali nationalists organised armed resistance under the banner of the Mukti Bahini.

As the conflict intensified, India intervened militarily in late 1971, framing its involvement as both a humanitarian necessity and a strategic imperative. The ensuing Indo-Pakistani War was brief but decisive. The Pakistani military, already overstretched and facing widespread local resistance in East Pakistan, was unable to withstand the combined strength of Indian forces and Bengali militias. On 16 December 1971, Pakistani troops in East Pakistan surrendered, and the territory declared independence as the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The fall of East Pakistan represented not only a military defeat but also a profound political and psychological blow to the Pakistani state. It marked the collapse of the original idea of Pakistan as a unified homeland for South Asian Muslims.

The defeat irrevocably damaged the credibility of Yahya Khan's government. Public outrage in West Pakistan was immediate and intense, with widespread condemnation of the regime's decision-making, its mishandling of negotiations and its resort to military repression. Facing overwhelming pressure from within the military and from civilian leaders, Yahya Khan resigned from office, transferring power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. His departure marked the end of Pakistan's second military regime and opened a new chapter in the country's political history—one defined by reconstruction, constitutional reform and ongoing debates about the role of the armed forces in public life.

CONCLUSION

The first military regimes in Pakistan between 1958 and 1971 represent one of the most formative and consequential periods in the country's political evolution. This era reshaped the foundations of the state, altered the balance between civil and military institutions, and laid down patterns of governance whose effects continued for decades. Although the military justified its intervention as a temporary corrective measure aimed at restoring stability and efficiency, the experience of these years demonstrates that authoritarian rule ultimately deepened the very problems it sought to resolve.

The regime of Ayub Khan, which initially appeared as a disciplined and modernising alternative to unstable parliamentary politics, gradually revealed the inherent contradictions of military-led governance. The emphasis on centralised authority and controlled political participation undermined the development of democratic institutions that might have fostered long-term stability. Economic growth during this period, while significant, was unevenly distributed and contributed to widening disparities between the country's two wings. The accumulation of wealth within a narrow circle of industrialists and the concentration of state investment in West Pakistan fostered resentment in East Pakistan, where the majority of the population resided. These inequalities fuelled regional nationalism and legitimised demands for greater autonomy, which the central government was unwilling to accommodate.

The transition from Ayub Khan to Yahya Khan did not meaningfully change the underlying structure of governance. Instead, it exposed the limits of military authority in a divided and politically mobilised society. Yahya Khan inherited a country already fractured by political frustration, economic grievances and deep mistrust between its two wings. Although he promised a transition to democracy and oversaw Pakistan's first direct national elections, his inability or unwillingness to honour the results of the 1970 vote triggered a crisis that spiralled rapidly out of control. The refusal to recognise the electoral mandate of the Awami League not only undermined constitutional principles but also escalated tensions into mass

civil disobedience, widespread violence and ultimately a devastating military crackdown.

The events of 1971—culminating in civil war, Indian intervention and the secession of East Pakistan as the independent state of Bangladesh—were not sudden or isolated developments. They were the culmination of years of political mismanagement, the suppression of regional aspirations, and an overreliance on coercive methods to maintain national unity. The disaster of 1971 revealed the fragility of a political order built on centralised military authority rather than representative governance and federal accommodation. It demonstrated that a state divided by linguistic, cultural and economic disparities cannot be held together through force alone. The military's dominance over political decision-making prevented the emergence of inclusive institutions capable of mediating regional interests and managing conflict through negotiation rather than repression.

Pakistan's early experience therefore offers several important lessons. It shows that authoritarian governance, regardless of its intentions or initial successes, cannot substitute for democratic legitimacy or broad-based participation. It illustrates that excessive centralisation by the military or the bureaucracy tends to exacerbate, rather than resolve, regional tensions. Most importantly, the period highlights that durable statehood in multiethnic and geographically diverse countries depends on institutions that reflect and respect local identities, enable meaningful political representation and ensure equitable development.

For contemporary states, particularly those in Central Asia that also grapple with questions of nation-building, civil–military relations and regional integration, Pakistan's history serves as a valuable case study. It underscores the importance of building inclusive political systems that can accommodate internal diversity and prevent the monopolisation of power by any single institution. It also demonstrates that economic development, if not accompanied by political reforms and social equity, risks deepening the very grievances that undermine national cohesion. The trajectory of Pakistan from 1958 to 1971 shows that sustainable governance cannot be achieved through coercion, administrative centralisation or controlled political participation. Instead, long-term stability requires transparent institutions, responsive leadership, meaningful representation and a commitment to resolving conflicts through dialogue and constitutional processes.

The first military regimes left a lasting imprint on Pakistan's political culture, establishing patterns of civil–military imbalance, constitutional instability and regional distrust that continued to resurface in subsequent decades. Yet they also offer a set of historical lessons that remain relevant for any society striving to build a stable, democratic and inclusive state. In examining this period, it becomes clear that the pursuit of national unity and modernisation cannot succeed when political pluralism is restricted and regional voices are marginalised. Only through inclusive governance and an equitable distribution of political and economic power can a diverse nation hope to achieve cohesion, legitimacy and enduring stability.

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