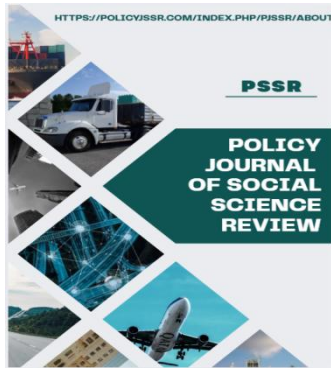




Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN: IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, POLITICAL PRACTICE, AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

¹**Zunera Akram**

¹MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha

zonwarraich@gmail.com

²Dr Asiya Saif Alvi

Chairperson Department of Political Science Associate Professor

University of Sargodha

asiya.saif@uos.edu.pk

Article Details

Received on 09 May, 2026

Accepted on 01 June, 2026

Published on 02 June, 2026

Copyright @Author

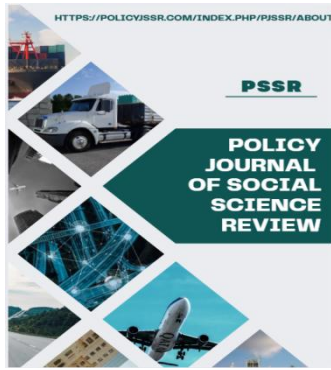
Corresponding Author: *

Zunera Akram

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the ideological roots of social democracy in Pakistan, analyze its practical application during different democratic and semi-democratic periods, and identify the structural constraints that have limited its sustainability and effectiveness. The research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing historical and analytical approaches. Data are drawn from secondary sources, including academic journals, constitutional texts, policy documents, and historical accounts, to trace the evolution of social democratic ideas and practices over time. Social democracy is a political and economic ideology that seeks to reconcile democratic governance with social justice, welfare provision, and economic equality through state intervention and institutional reform. In Pakistan, elements of social democratic thought have periodically appeared in political rhetoric, constitutional commitments, and welfare-oriented policies; however, social democracy has never emerged as a stable or institutionalized ideological framework.

Keywords: Social Democracy, Political Practice, Constitution, Ideology



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

Introduction

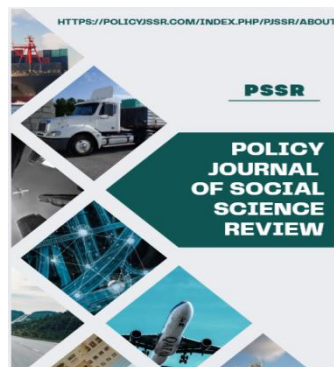
Social democracy is a political and economic ideology that seeks to balance the principles of democratic governance with social justice, economic equality, and collective welfare. Originating in late nineteenth-century Europe, social democracy emerged as a reformist alternative to revolutionary socialism, advocating gradual transformation of capitalist societies through democratic institutions, welfare policies, and state regulation of markets. Over time, social democratic models—particularly in Scandinavia and Western Europe—demonstrated that economic growth and social protection could coexist, thereby influencing political systems beyond the industrialized West. As a global concept, social democracy emphasizes inclusive development, progressive taxation, labor rights, and universal access to education, healthcare, and social security, making it particularly relevant for developing and post-colonial states grappling with inequality and weak institutional capacity. In Pakistan's political context, social democracy holds theoretical and practical relevance due to the country's persistent socio-economic challenges, including widespread poverty, income inequality, unemployment, and limited access to basic public services. Since its inception, Pakistan has struggled to define a stable political and economic direction, oscillating between state-led development, market-oriented reforms, and welfare-oriented populism. The country's constitutional framework, especially the

Objectives Resolution and the 1973 Constitution, reflects commitments to social justice, equality, and the welfare of citizens, which resonate strongly with social democratic principles. Moreover, political actors—most notably the Pakistan People Party (PPP)—have explicitly invoked social democratic or quasi-socialist narratives, such as “Islamic socialism,” to legitimize redistributive policies and state intervention in the economy.

Despite this apparent ideological affinity, social democracy has failed to consolidate as a coherent and sustainable political project in Pakistan. This raises critical research questions that guide the present study: Does social democracy in Pakistan possess a strong and consistent ideological foundation, or has it remained a fragmented and instrumentalized discourse? Why have social democratic policies, despite periodic implementation, been unable to achieve long-term sustainability and institutional continuity? Addressing these questions requires moving beyond leader-centric or policy-specific analyses and situating social democracy within Pakistan's broader historical, institutional, and structural context.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the ideological roots of social democracy in Pakistan, analyze its practical application during different democratic and semi-democratic periods, and identify the structural constraints that have limited its sustainability and effectiveness. The



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing historical and analytical approaches. Data are drawn from secondary sources, including academic journals, constitutional texts, policy documents, and historical accounts, to trace the evolution of social democratic ideas and practices over time. The findings suggest that social democracy in Pakistan has been undermined by weak democratic institutions, repeated disruptions of civilian rule, elite capture of political and economic power, and structural economic constraints such as fiscal limitations and dependence on international financial institutions. Furthermore, ideological fragmentation and the absence of strong left-oriented political organization have prevented the consolidation of a durable social democratic agenda. As a result, social democratic initiatives in Pakistan have remained episodic, policy-driven, and symbolic rather than structurally transformative, limiting their long-term impact on socio-economic inequality and democratic development.

Statement of the problem

The central research problem addressed in this study is the persistent disconnect between social democratic ideals and their political practice within Pakistan's state structure. Existing scholarship largely examines welfare policies, populist programs, or individual political leaders in isolation, leaving a significant research gap in understanding social democracy as

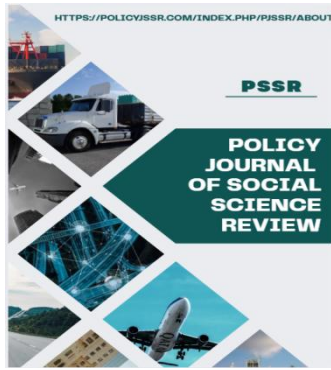
a coherent ideology shaped by historical, institutional, and structural factors.

Significance

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to fill a critical gap in the existing literature by offering a comprehensive and systematic analysis of social democracy in Pakistan. Rather than treating welfare initiatives as isolated phenomena, this research conceptualizes social democracy as an interconnected ideological and institutional framework shaped by historical legacies, power structures, and economic constraints. By examining both ideological roots and political practice, the study contributes to broader debates on democratic development, state capacity, and welfare politics in post-colonial societies. Furthermore, the findings hold important policy implications for contemporary governance in Pakistan, particularly in designing inclusive and sustainable welfare-oriented reforms within a democratic framework.

Social Democracy: A Conceptual Overview

Social democracy is a political ideology that seeks to achieve social justice, economic equality, and collective welfare within the framework of democratic governance and a regulated market economy. Unlike revolutionary ideologies, social democracy emphasizes gradual reform through democratic institutions rather than radical transformation of the capitalist system. It accepts private ownership and market mechanisms but advocates state intervention to correct



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

market failures, reduce inequality, and ensure social protection for vulnerable groups. Core principles of social democracy include progressive taxation, strong labor rights, universal access to education and healthcare, and the development of comprehensive social safety nets.

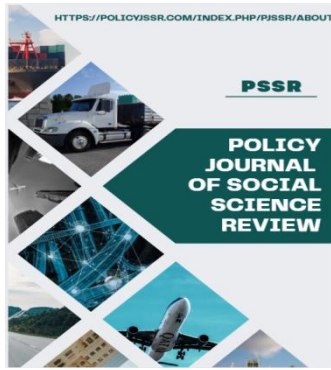
Social democracy differs significantly from socialism and liberal democracy in both ideological orientation and policy objectives. Classical socialism traditionally calls for collective ownership of the means of production and seeks to replace capitalism with a centrally planned economic system. While modern democratic socialism has moderated these demands, socialism remains more critical of market mechanisms than social democracy. In contrast, social democracy does not seek to abolish capitalism but to reform it by embedding social justice within a democratic and institutional framework. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, prioritizes individual freedoms, political rights, and limited government intervention in economic affairs. While liberal democracy emphasizes procedural democracy and market efficiency, it often treats social welfare as secondary to economic freedom. Social democracy challenges this approach by arguing that political equality cannot be achieved without a reasonable degree of economic and social equality. Thus, social democracy occupies a middle ground between socialism and liberal democracy,

combining political democracy with social and economic rights.

The modern understanding of social democracy has been largely shaped by the historical experience of European social democratic movements. Emerging in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, social democracy evolved from labor movements and socialist parties that gradually abandoned revolutionary strategies in favor of parliamentary politics. Following the Second World War, social democratic parties in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom played a central role in constructing welfare states based on full employment, social insurance, and redistributive policies. The European experience demonstrated that democratic capitalism could be reconciled with social justice through strong institutions, organized labor, and political consensus. This historical trajectory has provided a reference point for social democratic debates in developing and post-colonial societies, including Pakistan, where similar aspirations have been articulated but implemented under very different structural conditions.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this study is informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives: welfare state theory, post-colonial state theory, and dependency theory. Welfare state theory provides the primary analytical lens for examining the role of the state in ensuring social protection, redistribution, and economic stability. It emphasizes institutional capacity,



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

political commitment, and class coalitions as key determinants of successful social democratic outcomes.

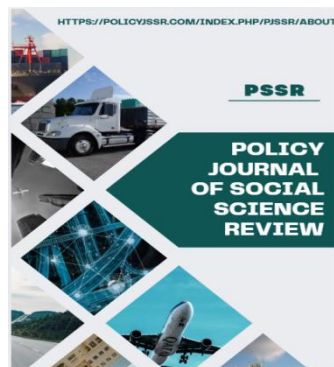
Post-colonial state theory is employed to understand the historical and institutional legacies that shape Pakistan's political economy. This perspective highlights how colonial administrative structures, weak democratic traditions, and centralized power have constrained the development of inclusive welfare institutions. Dependency theory further complements this analysis by drawing attention to Pakistan's position within the global economic system, particularly its reliance on external financing and international financial institutions, which has limited policy autonomy and constrained redistributive agendas.

Welfare state theory serves as the primary analytical lens for examining social democracy, as it focuses on the role of the state in promoting social protection, economic redistribution, and collective well-being. The theory emphasizes that successful welfare states depend on strong democratic institutions, sustainable fiscal capacity, and broad-based political coalitions, particularly between labor, middle classes, and political parties. In classical welfare state models, such as those developed in Western Europe, social democratic policies were institutionalized through universal social insurance schemes, progressive taxation, and state responsibility for education, healthcare, and employment. Applied to Pakistan, welfare state theory helps assess

the extent to which state capacity, political commitment, and institutional continuity have enabled or constrained the development of social democratic policies. It also highlights the importance of policy sustainability and institutionalization rather than short-term or populist welfare interventions.

Dependency theory provides a critical perspective on the external economic constraints that shape policy choices in developing countries. According to this theory, states in the Global South remain structurally dependent on advanced capitalist economies through trade imbalances, foreign aid, debt, and the influence of international financial institutions. This dependency limits domestic policy autonomy and restricts the ability of states to pursue redistributive and welfare-oriented agendas. In the context of Pakistan, dependency theory is particularly relevant in understanding how reliance on external financing, repeated engagement with the International Monetary Fund, and conditional economic reforms have constrained social democratic policy space. The theory explains why welfare initiatives in Pakistan often face fiscal limitations and policy reversals, undermining their long-term sustainability.

Post-colonial state theory is employed to analyze the historical and institutional legacies inherited from colonial rule that continue to shape Pakistan's political system. This perspective emphasizes weak democratic traditions, centralized



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

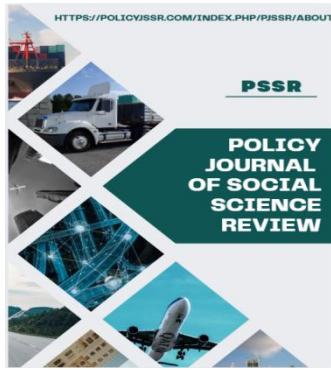
authority, elite domination, and the persistence of bureaucratic and military influence in governance. Post-colonial states often prioritize regime stability over social welfare, resulting in limited political accountability and uneven policy implementation. In Pakistan, post-colonial state theory helps explain the fragility of democratic institutions, frequent interruptions of civilian rule, and the marginalization of popular participation in policymaking. These structural characteristics have significantly constrained the institutionalization of social democracy, despite its ideological appeal and constitutional recognition of social justice.

Ideological Roots of Social Democracy in Pakistan

The ideological foundations of social democracy in Pakistan are neither linear nor uniform; rather, they are shaped by a combination of pre-partition political thought, post-colonial state-building imperatives, and evolving interpretations of Islam and social justice. While Pakistan did not inherit a fully developed social democratic tradition, several ideological strands contributed to the emergence of welfare-oriented and redistributive ideas within its political discourse. This section examines these roots by analyzing both pre-partition influences and post-independence ideological developments.

Before the creation of Pakistan, the All-India Muslim League articulated a political vision that emphasized the socio-

economic uplift of Muslims in British India. Although the League was not a social democratic party in the classical sense, its political discourse frequently addressed issues of economic deprivation, social inequality, and minority rights. The demand for Pakistan was not solely framed in religious or cultural terms but also as a response to economic marginalization and unequal access to resources under colonial rule. The League's emphasis on social justice, state responsibility, and economic security for marginalized Muslim communities reflected proto-social democratic concerns, particularly in its advocacy for state intervention to protect vulnerable groups in a future Muslim-majority state. The intellectual contributions of Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah provided an important ideological foundation for welfare-oriented thought in Pakistan. Iqbal's critique of unfettered capitalism and his emphasis on social justice, economic equality, and collective responsibility resonate strongly with social democratic principles. While rejecting Marxist materialism, Iqbal advocated an ethical economic order rooted in Islamic values that emphasized social welfare and human dignity. Similarly, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah consistently highlighted the importance of economic justice, equality of opportunity, and state responsibility in his speeches. His vision of Pakistan included commitments to protecting the poor, ensuring labor rights, and eliminating exploitation, suggesting an



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

ideological orientation compatible with social democratic values, albeit framed within a constitutional and democratic framework.

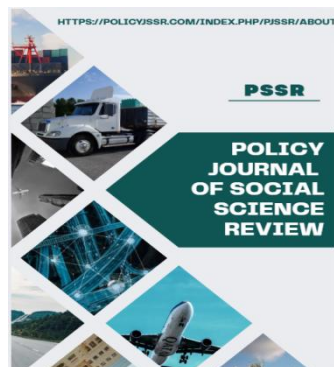
Following independence, Pakistan adopted a state-led development model aimed at rapid industrialization and economic modernization. During the 1950s and 1960s, the state played a central role in economic planning, infrastructure development, and industrial growth. Although this model prioritized growth over redistribution, it nevertheless reflected a belief in strong state intervention in economic affairs—an essential component of social democratic thought. Public sector enterprises, five-year plans, and development institutions were established to guide economic activity. However, the benefits of growth were unevenly distributed, leading to regional disparities and social inequality, which later generated demands for more explicit social democratic reforms.

Islamic principles of social justice have played a significant role in shaping welfare discourse in Pakistan. Concepts such as equality, redistribution of wealth, and social responsibility are deeply embedded in Islamic teachings, particularly through mechanisms like zakat and the prohibition of exploitation. Successive political regimes have invoked Islamic social justice to legitimize welfare policies and redistributive measures. This narrative reached its most explicit form during the 1970s with the articulation of “Islamic socialism,” which sought to reconcile Islamic values with state-led

redistribution and social welfare. While interpretations varied across political actors, the integration of Islam and social justice provided a culturally resonant framework for social democratic ideas in Pakistan, distinguishing them from secular Western models.

The Constitution of 1973 represents the most comprehensive articulation of welfare-oriented principles in Pakistan’s constitutional history and provides a significant ideological foundation for social democratic thought. Framed in the aftermath of political disintegration and economic crisis, the Constitution sought to redefine the relationship between the state and citizens by embedding social justice, equality, and state responsibility within its legal framework. While not explicitly endorsing social democracy as an ideology, the constitutional text reflects many of its core principles.

The Preamble and the Objectives Resolution, which form an integral part of the Constitution, emphasize equality, social justice, and the well-being of the people as fundamental objectives of the state. These commitments are further reinforced in the chapter on Fundamental Rights, which guarantees equality before the law, protection against exploitation, freedom of association, and safeguards for labor, including the right to form trade unions. Such provisions align closely with social democratic emphasis on political rights complemented by socio-economic protections.



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

More explicitly, the Principles of Policy outlined in Articles 37 and 38 establish the state's responsibility to promote social welfare. These articles commit the state to ensuring social and economic well-being, reducing inequality in income and wealth, providing basic necessities such as education, healthcare, and housing, and protecting marginalized groups, including women, children, and the disabled. Article 38, in particular, mandates the promotion of social justice through equitable distribution of resources and the prevention of concentration of wealth, reflecting a clear redistributive intent.

Despite these progressive commitments, the welfare provisions of the 1973 Constitution remain largely non-justiciable, limiting their enforceability in practice. As a result, while the Constitution provides a strong normative and ideological basis for social democracy, the translation of these principles into sustained policy outcomes has depended heavily on political will, institutional capacity, and economic conditions. Consequently, the constitutional framework has functioned more as a symbolic affirmation of welfare ideals rather than a binding mechanism for social democratic transformation.

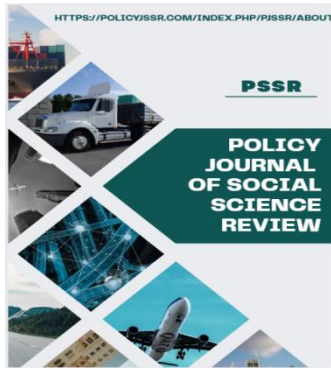
Political Practice of Social Democracy in Pakistan

Social democratic ideals in Pakistan, despite their presence in political discourse and constitutional commitments, have been implemented inconsistently. Their practical expression

has depended heavily on the ideological orientation of political regimes, institutional capacity, and socio-economic constraints. This section analyzes the political practice of social democracy across key historical periods, focusing on state-led interventions, welfare initiatives, and labor-oriented reforms.

During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's tenure, the most explicit implementation of social democratic principles occurred through extensive nationalization of industries, banks, and educational institutions. Bhutto's government aimed to redistribute economic power and reduce private sector dominance, reflecting a core social democratic principle of state intervention for equitable growth. Nationalization targeted major industrial sectors, including steel, banking, and manufacturing, with the stated goal of promoting social equity and inclusive development. While these policies increased state control over key economic resources, they also faced criticism for bureaucratic inefficiency, mismanagement, and unintended economic stagnation.

Land reforms were another pillar of Bhutto's social democratic agenda, intended to dismantle feudal structures and reduce rural inequality. The government-imposed ceilings on landholdings and redistributed excess land to tenant farmers. These reforms aimed to empower marginalized rural populations, promote agrarian productivity, and reduce socio-economic



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

disparities. However, loopholes in enforcement and resistance from landed elites limited their effectiveness, highlighting structural constraints in implementing redistributive policies.

Labor rights were strengthened through legislation guaranteeing unionization, collective bargaining, and protection against exploitation. Workers in key industries gained representation, minimum wage protections, and social security benefits. These reforms reflected Bhutto's vision of a socially just economy where state intervention supported equitable labor conditions. Nonetheless, the long-term institutionalization of labor rights remained weak, and many gains were reversed in subsequent regimes.

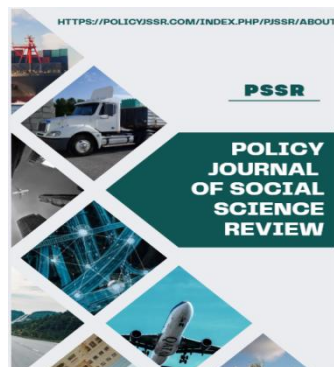
During the democratic interludes led by Benazir Bhutto (1988–1990; 1993–1996) and later Asif Ali Zardari (2008–2013), social democratic policies were implemented within a liberalized economic framework. Efforts were made to promote poverty alleviation, education, and health services, alongside targeted programs for women's empowerment and social inclusion. However, political instability, fiscal constraints, and dependency on international financial institutions limited the scope and sustainability of these initiatives. Welfare measures were frequently episodic and subject to abrupt policy reversals.

The introduction of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) in 2008 marked a landmark attempt at institutionalized social protection. BISP provided cash transfers to low-income

households, particularly targeting women, and represented a shift from growth-focused development to welfare-oriented governance. Similarly, programs like the Ehsaas initiative under PTI expanded social safety nets, focusing on poverty reduction, healthcare, and education. While these programs reflected social democratic aspirations, they were largely technocratic and targeted rather than universal, emphasizing immediate relief over systemic structural reform.

In recent years, the political practice of social democracy in Pakistan has increasingly intersected with welfare-oriented populism, particularly under the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. The launch of the Ehsaas Program in 2019 exemplifies this approach, consolidating various social protection initiatives under a single, centrally coordinated framework. Ehsaas aims to reduce poverty, empower marginalized communities, and expand access to health, education, and financial assistance, with a specific focus on women, children, and vulnerable populations. Through cash transfers, scholarships, interest-free loans, and healthcare provisions, Ehsaas represents a significant step toward institutionalizing social welfare in Pakistan, reflecting the state's responsibility for social protection—a core principle of social democracy.

However, the PTI approach also illustrates the tension between social democratic ideals and populist welfare strategies. While social democracy



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

emphasizes structural redistribution, universal access to services, and the institutionalization of welfare policies, welfare populism often prioritizes politically visible, short-term interventions designed to maximize immediate support and electoral appeal. Ehsaas, though transformative in coverage, is primarily targeted rather than universal, reflecting a technocratic and politically responsive design rather than a comprehensive social democratic vision. Programs under welfare populism are often contingent on the ruling party's tenure, exposing them to discontinuity and undermining long-term institutional sustainability.

This distinction underscores the broader challenge for social democracy in Pakistan: while welfare programs such as Ehsaas mitigate poverty and enhance social protection, their implementation is constrained by political expediency, fiscal limitations, and the absence of a coherent ideological and institutional framework. Consequently, contemporary developments reveal that the practice of social democracy in Pakistan continues to be fragmented, with populist welfare initiatives serving as a pragmatic, though partial, substitute for sustained structural reform

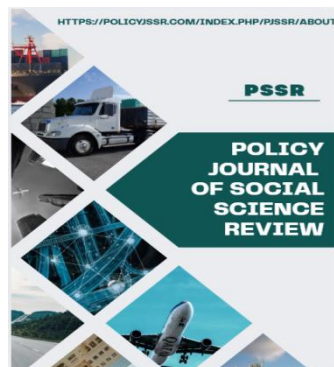
Structural Constraints on Social Democracy in Pakistan

The implementation and institutionalization of social democracy in Pakistan have faced persistent structural constraints. These constraints arise from the interaction of political,

economic, and ideological factors that limit the state's capacity to translate welfare-oriented ideas into sustainable policies. Among these, weak democratic institutions, recurring military interventions, and chronic political instability have played a central role in undermining social democratic agendas. This section analyzes these constraints in detail.

A major barrier to the consolidation of social democracy in Pakistan has been the fragility of democratic institutions. The country's political history is marked by frequent military interventions, periods of authoritarian rule, and the suspension of civilian governance, which have disrupted the continuity of welfare policies and reformist agendas. Military interventions, often justified as necessary to stabilize governance or protect national interests, have recurrently removed civilian governments that attempted to implement redistributive reforms. Such interruptions prevent the long-term institutionalization of social democratic programs, making them vulnerable to reversal or neglect.

Political instability further compounds these challenges. Short-lived governments, frequent changes in leadership, and weak party structures create an environment where welfare policies are often implemented in an ad hoc and reactive manner. Social democratic initiatives, such as labor reforms, land redistribution, or universal welfare programs, require long-term political commitment, institutional oversight, and bureaucratic



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

capacity—all of which are undermined by unstable governance. Additionally, electoral volatility and patronage-based politics often incentivize populist, short-term welfare measures rather than systemic reforms, limiting the transformative potential of social democracy.

Together, these weaknesses in democratic institutions have created a structural environment in which social democratic ideals remain aspirational rather than operational. Even programs with strong ideological backing, such as the nationalization policies of the Bhutto era or contemporary welfare initiatives like Ehsaas, face discontinuity and inconsistent implementation due to institutional fragility and recurring interruptions of civilian governance.

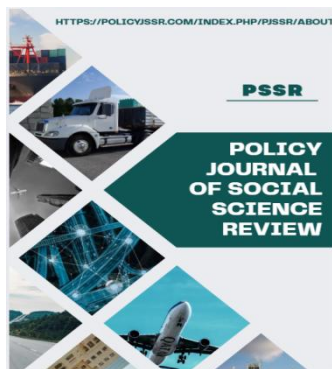
Economic limitations constitute one of the most significant structural barriers to the implementation and sustainability of social democratic policies in Pakistan. Despite constitutional commitments and periodic welfare initiatives, the state's capacity to deliver comprehensive social services has been consistently constrained by fiscal fragility, external financial dependence, and structural weaknesses in revenue generation.

A primary challenge arises from pressure exerted by international financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Pakistan has frequently relied on external loans and aid packages to stabilize its balance of payments and finance development projects.

Conditionalities associated with these programs often require fiscal consolidation, reduction of subsidies, and liberalization of the economy. While these measures may stabilize macroeconomic indicators, they constrain the state's ability to pursue redistributive policies, expand social spending, or implement long-term welfare programs. As a result, social democratic initiatives are often curtailed or modified to align with external economic mandates rather than domestic social priorities.

Another critical constraint is debt dependency, which diverts substantial portions of the national budget toward debt servicing. High levels of public debt reduce fiscal space for investment in social protection, education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation—key components of social democracy. This structural vulnerability reinforces a cycle in which welfare programs remain underfunded and politically conditional, limiting their transformative potential.

Additionally, Pakistan's weak tax structure further restricts state capacity. Low tax-to-GDP ratios, narrow tax bases, and ineffective revenue collection undermine the government's ability to finance universal welfare programs. The reliance on indirect taxation and regressive revenue measures also exacerbates economic inequality, counteracting the redistributive objectives of social democratic policies. Without comprehensive tax reform and enhanced domestic revenue mobilization, the state



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

remains constrained in its ability to institutionalize welfare initiatives.

Together, these economic constraints illustrate that social democratic aspirations in Pakistan are frequently subordinated to structural fiscal pressures, external dependencies, and institutional limitations, preventing the realization of a sustainable and universal welfare state.

A major structural constraint on social democracy in Pakistan is the capture of political and economic power by elite groups, including the landed aristocracy and influential business classes. This phenomenon, often described as elite capture, limits the scope of redistributive policies, perpetuates inequality, and undermines efforts to institutionalize social democratic reforms.

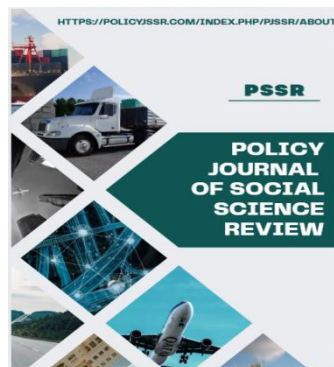
The dominance of the landed elite has been a persistent feature of Pakistan's socio-political landscape. Large landowners exert significant influence over rural governance, electoral outcomes, and policymaking. This control allows them to resist agrarian reforms, redistribute land, or implement progressive taxation, thereby obstructing the equitable redistribution of resources central to social democracy. Historical land reform efforts, such as those undertaken during the Bhutto era, achieved limited success precisely because feudal elites leveraged political influence, legal loopholes, and bureaucratic inertia to protect their interests.

In parallel, bourgeois politics—where economic elites dominate industrial, commercial, and financial sectors—

further constrains welfare-oriented policies. Political parties often rely on wealthy donors and industrial lobby groups for campaign financing, creating incentives to prioritize pro-business policies over redistributive reforms. As a result, social democratic programs aimed at reducing inequality are frequently diluted, fragmented, or delayed to accommodate elite interests. This structural reality reinforces a cycle of policy capture, where the priorities of a small, powerful minority supersede broader social welfare objectives.

Combined, feudal dominance and bourgeois political influence severely limit the capacity of the state to implement universal welfare programs, secure equitable resource distribution, and sustain social democratic initiatives. Elite capture ensures that, even when governments attempt to pursue redistributive policies, structural power imbalances prevent their comprehensive and long-term realization.

Another significant structural constraint on the institutionalization of social democracy in Pakistan is ideological fragmentation, which has impeded the development of a coherent political and policy framework for welfare and redistribution. Divergent interpretations of social, religious, and economic principles have created persistent tensions between competing visions of the state, weakening the continuity and effectiveness of social democratic initiatives.



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

A central aspect of this fragmentation is the tension between Islamization and a secular welfare state. Since the late 1970s, successive political regimes have sought to integrate Islamic principles into governance, including social justice and redistribution, as part of state ideology. While Islamic social justice emphasizes equity, zakat-based redistribution, and the welfare of the needy, its implementation has often been selective, symbolic, or politically instrumentalized. In contrast, secular models of social democracy advocate universal welfare, institutionalized redistribution, and state-led social protection programs based on citizenship rights rather than religious affiliation. The coexistence of these competing frameworks has led to policy ambiguity and inconsistency, complicating efforts to develop a systematic welfare state.

Another critical dimension of ideological fragmentation is the organizational weakness of left-wing parties in Pakistan. Historically, parties advocating social democratic or socialist principles have suffered from fragmentation, limited grassroots mobilization, and internal divisions. This weakness has restricted their ability to influence policy, form stable political coalitions, or sustain long-term social democratic programs. As a result, social democratic ideals have often been incorporated into broader party platforms opportunistically, rather than through coherent ideological commitment.

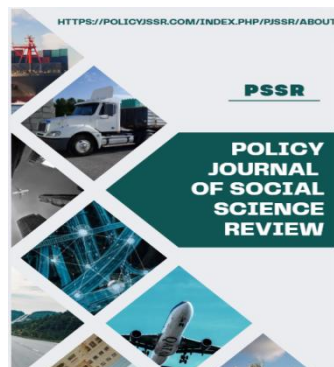
The combined effects of competing ideological paradigms and weak political organization have limited the realization of social democratic objectives in Pakistan. Fragmented ideology reduces policy consistency, undermines institutionalization, and allows elite and populist interests to dominate the welfare agenda, leaving social democracy largely aspirational rather than fully operational.

Comparative Perspective

Understanding the challenges and limitations of social democracy in Pakistan benefits from a comparative perspective, both within the South Asian region and against global benchmarks. Comparative analysis highlights the structural, institutional, and ideological factors that differentiate Pakistan's experience from other countries and provides lessons for the sustainable implementation of welfare-oriented policies.

A regional comparison of social democratic practices offers valuable insights into the structural and institutional factors that shape welfare policies in South Asia. Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh share common historical legacies, including colonial rule, post-independence state-building challenges, and socio-economic inequality. However, their approaches to social democracy and welfare-oriented governance have diverged significantly due to differences in political stability, institutional capacity, and ideological orientation.

In India, social democracy has been implemented through a hybrid model



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

that combines liberal democratic institutions with welfare-oriented policies. Post-independence governments established universal public education, healthcare, and labor protection mechanisms alongside targeted poverty alleviation programs. While bureaucratic inefficiency and regional disparities have limited policy effectiveness, sustained electoral democracy and relatively strong institutional structures have allowed welfare initiatives to persist across successive governments. India's experience demonstrates that political continuity and institutional resilience are critical for embedding social democratic practices in a diverse and populous country.

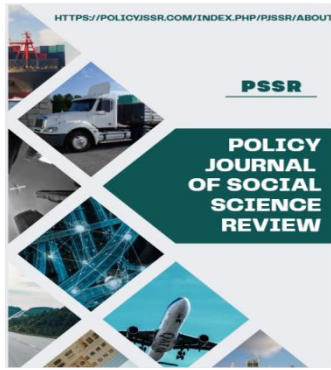
Bangladesh provides another instructive example. Despite political volatility, low per capita income, and resource constraints, the state has pursued aggressive poverty reduction and social protection programs. Microfinance initiatives, female-targeted cash transfers, and universal primary education reflect a pragmatic approach to welfare that balances immediate poverty alleviation with long-term human development objectives. The success of these initiatives highlights the importance of policy focus, institutional coordination, and targeted interventions even in economically constrained environments.

By comparing Pakistan with India and Bangladesh, it becomes evident that sustained political commitment, institutional continuity, and adaptive policy design are essential for effective

social democratic governance. While Pakistan has introduced welfare programs such as the Ehsaas and BISP initiatives, inconsistent implementation, elite capture, and structural constraints have limited their transformative potential. Regional comparisons suggest that Pakistan could enhance the sustainability of its social democratic policies by strengthening institutional frameworks, ensuring political continuity, and integrating both universal and targeted welfare mechanisms.

Comparing social democratic practices in Scandinavia with those in developing states provides critical insights into the conditions necessary for the institutionalization and sustainability of welfare-oriented governance. Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, represent global exemplars of social democracy, characterized by universal welfare provision, inclusive economic policies, and high levels of institutional capacity. In these countries, social democracy is deeply embedded within political culture, electoral processes, and state structures, allowing for consistent implementation of redistributive policies over decades.

Scandinavian welfare states are marked by comprehensive social protection systems, including universal healthcare, free education, robust labor rights, and progressive taxation. These systems are supported by strong democratic institutions, high bureaucratic efficiency, and broad social consensus, which



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

collectively ensure that social democratic principles are operationalized systematically rather than episodically. Additionally, a culture of civic participation and transparency reinforces accountability, enabling the state to maintain high levels of social equality and economic security without relying on short-term political populism.

In contrast, developing states, including Pakistan, face structural and institutional constraints that hinder the effective implementation of social democracy. Weak democratic institutions, frequent political instability, elite capture, fiscal fragility, and dependence on external financial assistance limit the state's capacity to establish universal welfare programs. Welfare initiatives in developing countries are often targeted, program-based, and politically contingent, lacking the universality, institutional continuity, and social legitimacy seen in Scandinavian models. Moreover, socio-economic inequality, low tax-to-GDP ratios, and underdeveloped bureaucratic structures further constrain the state's ability to redistribute resources effectively. The comparison underscores that while the goals of social democracy—such as social justice, equity, and inclusive development—are shared across contexts, the capacity to achieve these objectives is deeply dependent on institutional strength, political stability, and societal consensus. For developing states like Pakistan, lessons from Scandinavia emphasize the importance of combining robust institutions, fiscal reforms, and

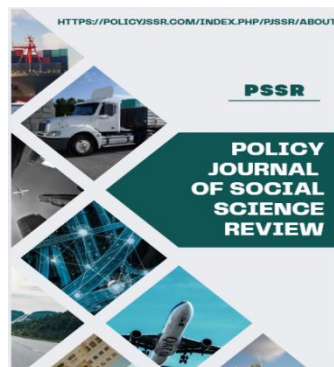
inclusive governance to make social democratic policies sustainable and effective.

Lessons for Pakistan

Comparative analysis of social democratic practices in India, Bangladesh, and Scandinavian countries provides several critical lessons for Pakistan's pursuit of welfare-oriented governance. These lessons highlight both structural and policy-related reforms necessary to strengthen social democracy within the country's unique socio-political and economic context.

First, institutional continuity and political stability are essential. The experiences of India and Bangladesh demonstrate that sustained welfare programs require governments capable of maintaining consistent policy direction across political cycles. Pakistan's frequent regime changes and interruptions in democratic governance have undermined the sustainability of welfare initiatives. Ensuring democratic resilience and institutionalized policy frameworks is therefore crucial for the long-term success of social democratic reforms.

Second, a balance between universal and targeted welfare programs is necessary. Scandinavian countries achieve high levels of social equity through universal provision of healthcare, education, and social security, while Bangladesh demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted interventions for vulnerable groups. For Pakistan, integrating universal welfare frameworks with targeted support for marginalized communities can enhance



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

coverage, legitimacy, and social impact, while remaining fiscally feasible.

Third, strengthening state capacity and fiscal sustainability is vital. Effective social democratic governance relies on robust bureaucratic institutions, efficient revenue collection, and sustainable financing mechanisms. Pakistan's weak tax-to-GDP ratio, dependence on external financing, and bureaucratic inefficiencies have constrained its ability to implement and sustain redistributive policies. Reforms aimed at increasing domestic revenue mobilization and improving administrative efficiency are therefore essential.

Fourth, political and ideological coherence is critical. The Scandinavian model benefits from broad societal consensus around welfare and redistribution, whereas Pakistan's fragmented ideological landscape—between Islamic social justice narratives and secular welfare frameworks—has limited policy consistency. A coherent ideological commitment, bridging cultural, religious, and social democratic principles, can enhance legitimacy, continuity, and effectiveness of welfare initiatives.

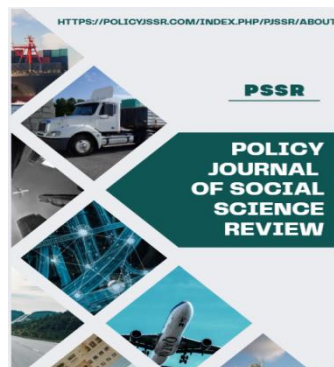
In summary, the comparative perspective suggests that Pakistan can strengthen its social democratic trajectory by fostering institutional stability, combining universal and targeted welfare measures, enhancing fiscal and administrative capacity, and developing a coherent ideological framework. Implementing these lessons would enable the country to

move beyond episodic and politically contingent welfare programs toward sustainable and transformative social democratic governance.

Discussion

The experience of social democracy in Pakistan highlights a persistent gap between ideological commitment and practical implementation, which has prevented the full institutionalization of welfare-oriented governance. While social democratic principles—such as social justice, economic redistribution, labor rights, and universal access to basic services—have been repeatedly articulated in political discourse and constitutional provisions, their translation into sustained policy outcomes has remained elusive.

One central factor is disconnected between ideology and political practice. Political parties in Pakistan have often adopted social democratic rhetoric to garner popular support without establishing long-term institutional frameworks or securing bipartisan consensus. Even initiatives with clear ideological backing, such as the Bhutto-era nationalizations or contemporary welfare programs like Ehsaas and BISP, have remained programmatic and episodic, reflecting short-term political expediency rather than a coherent social democratic agenda. This gap between normative commitments and practical execution has undermined the credibility and sustainability of social democratic policies.



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

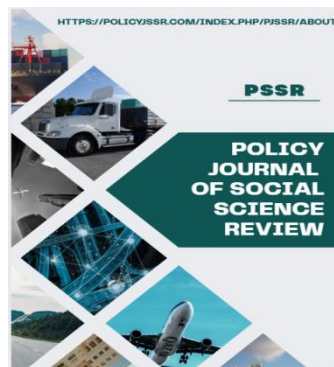
Equally significant are the structural constraints that cumulatively limit the state's capacity to implement welfare-oriented reforms. Weak democratic institutions, frequent military interventions, political instability, and elite capture have disrupted continuity and prevented the consolidation of social democratic programs. Economic vulnerabilities, including fiscal fragility, debt dependency, IMF conditionalities, and a weak tax base, further restrict the state's ability to finance universal welfare initiatives. Additionally, ideological fragmentation between secular welfare models and Islamic social justice frameworks, coupled with the organizational weakness of left-wing political parties, has prevented the emergence of a coherent and politically sustainable social democratic vision.

The cumulative impact of these structural, economic, and ideological constraints creates an environment in which social democracy in Pakistan remains largely aspirational. Welfare programs are implemented in a fragmented, targeted, and politically contingent manner, rather than being institutionalized as universal and sustainable mechanisms of social justice. Comparative perspectives from India, Bangladesh, and Scandinavia underscore that while contextual adaptation is necessary, institutional stability, ideological coherence, and robust state capacity are prerequisites for translating social democratic ideals into enduring governance outcomes.

In essence, the discussion reveals that the failure to institutionalize social democracy in Pakistan is not due to the absence of ideological awareness but rather to a complex interplay of political, structural, and economic constraints that inhibit policy continuity, universality, and effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires integrated reforms across institutional, fiscal, and ideological dimensions to bridge the gap between rhetoric and practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that although social democratic ideals such as social justice, welfare provision, labor rights, and equitable redistribution have been reflected in Pakistan's political discourse, constitutional commitments, and welfare initiatives, they have not been sustainably institutionalized. Programs ranging from Bhutto-era reforms to contemporary social protection schemes demonstrate periodic efforts toward social democracy; however, weak democratic institutions, military interventions, elite dominance, fiscal limitations, and ideological fragmentation have hindered their long-term effectiveness. The findings suggest that the institutionalization of social democracy in Pakistan requires comprehensive reforms, including stronger democratic institutions, progressive taxation, balanced civil-military relations, and the revival of coherent political forces committed to social justice. By combining targeted welfare programs with broader universal reforms, Pakistan can create a more



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

sustainable framework for poverty reduction, social protection, and inclusive socio-economic development.

References

- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
- Government of Pakistan. (1973). *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973*. National Assembly of Pakistan.
- Haq, K. (2007). *Human development in South Asia*. Oxford University Press.
- Hussain, A. (1999). *Pakistan: The economy of an elitist state*. Oxford University Press.
- International Monetary Fund. (2024). *Pakistan: Staff report for the Article IV consultation and request for an extended fund facility*. IMF.
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jinnah, M. A. (1947). *Speeches and statements of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah*. Government of Pakistan.
- Khan, H. (2017). *Constitutional and political history of Pakistan* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Leftwich, A. (2000). *States of development: On the primacy of politics in development*. Polity Press.
- Myrdal, G. (1968). *Asian drama: An inquiry into the poverty of nations* (Vols. 1-3). Pantheon Books.
- Nayyar, D. (Ed.). (2008). *Development with equity: The unfinished agenda*. Oxford University Press.
- Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Pakistan economic survey 2023-24*. Government of Pakistan.
- PPP. (1967). *Founding manifesto of the Pakistan Peoples Party*. Pakistan Peoples Party Publications.
- Prebisch, R. (1950). *The economic development of Latin America and its principal problems*. United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America.
- Waseem, M. (2006). *Democratization in Pakistan: A study of the 2002 elections*. Oxford University Press.