Qualitative analysis of the causes and implications of corruption in Punjab, Pakistan.

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Abstract

Corruption is a worldwide challenge that is becoming more severe day by day. It is associated with every section of society and has subsequently created many serious problems in development and governance. Research on corruption has provided useful guidelines for social scientists, policy makers, and public and private organizations. The causes of corruption are generally complex, so there is no single cause or solution. The present study entitled "Qualitative study of the causes and effects of corruption in Punjab, Pakistan" was conducted in four districts of Punjab province. It aimed at studying the socio-economic profiles of the respondents, studying the political, social and cultural factors responsible for corruption in Pakistan, assessing the effect of bad institutional mechanisms and lack of transparency in corrupting the system. The wider effects of corruption on governance and society were also studied. The qualitative research was conducted in the districts of Rawalpindi, Attock, Mianwali and Faisalabad, which belong to different social and economic strata of Punjab. The data were gathered through focus group discussions, which led to deeper insights into the problems. The data collected were analysed through SPSS software, applying both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques at the univariate and bivariate levels. Based on the analysis, the present study gives policy guidelines, which are practicable and aimed at reducing corruption, use of institutional accountability and good governance in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Corruption, Good governance, Political stability, Accountability, Rule of law.*

Introduction:

Corruption continues to be an inherent problem in Pakistan, acting as a serious impediment to socio-economic development, impairing the performance of government institutions, and undermining public trust in state institutions. It consists of the misuse of power for private gain and covers a broad spectrum of public and private life, compromising justice, equity, and efficiency in the administration of government functions. According to the latest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of Transparency International, Pakistan ranks 135 out of 180 countries, indicating continuing problems of accountability and transparency. The continuing prevalence of corruption is due to the ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms, the lack of enforcement measures against corruption, and political influence on oversight mechanisms. Although steps such as the procedural digitalization of public services and certain reforms have produced limited results, persistent systemic corruption remains one of the key obstacles to effective administration of governmental functions and sustainable development. This research will

examine the fundamental causes, forms, and consequences of corruption in Pakistan, focussing specifically on its impact on economic performance, administrative efficiency, and public confidence. The research will seek to evaluate existing anti-corruption strategies and will evaluate them using qualitative and quantitative techniques. The research will suggest concrete measures to enhance accountability and transparency in government for the improvement of public confidence in authorities (Transparency International, 2024).

Corruption affects various areas of the world in different ways, yet is a global crisis, and one of the most serious problems facing the world at present, according to Transparency International (TI). Corruption occurs in developed as well as in developing countries, but its effects are particularly serious in the poorer nations. The results of corruption can be placed in four main classifications: political, economic, social, and environmental. Politically, it undermines democracy and the rule of law; economically, it siphons off national resources and impedes investments; socially, it undermines the confidence of the people in its leaders and government agencies; and environmentally, it contributes to the degrading of the ecological balance. Corruption undermines the integrity of the institutions of government, destroys the legitimacy of the state, and disrupts the processes of governance and development. It also leads to serious monetary losses on the part of the national treasury, which injures the ability of the government to give essential services to the people such as law enforcement, health care, sanitation, and water supply. Thus, many of the governments resort to excessive borrowing to finance their operations and development programs, and this further increases the burden of the national debt. In the final analysis, corruption lowers the quality of government and hinders long-term economic growth (Ibodullaevich & Kizi, 2021).

Corruption has been a severe and ingrained issue in Pakistan since independence. In his famous speech to Pakistan's first Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah laid emphasis on the proper maintenance of law and order as the first and foremost duty of government (Shah et al., 2021). Corruption may be defined as the deep-seated abuse of authority or systems by individuals, groups or organizations for personal or collective advantage through manipulation, collusion and administrative failure. It extends far beyond pecuniary dishonesty because hypocrisy and deceit have assumed a normal course in institutional and social structure. The forms of corruption in Pakistan today extend through all spheres of government, from bureaucratic inefficiency to political intrigue at the level of elite (Uroos et al., 2022).

Even with the implementation of comprehensive legal frameworks like the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), the National Accountability Ordinance (NAO), and the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), as well as institutional mechanisms like the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the Public Accounts Committee, the Auditor-General of Pakistan, the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA), the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), and the Ombudsmen offices, corruption still exists at various levels of government (Shah et al., 2021).

Governance did not get much analytical attention during the Cold War. However, social and political analysts' primary concerns in the post-Cold War era were new global issues like poverty, unemployment, corruption, economic stagnation, and institutional weakness. Compared to developed economies, these issues are typically more severe and

complex in developing countries. There is currently broad consensus among academics and decision-makers that these issues are essentially related to governance. In addition to encouraging development and enhancing service delivery, governance offers a structured framework for addressing the underlying causes of societal issues. In addition to guaranteeing the provision of services, effective governance places a strong emphasis on their caliber, openness, and equity. Strong institutions thrive in encouraging settings, which improves their ability to handle difficulties and promote national cohesion (Muzaffar, Fern, & Yaseen, 2024).

As a result of collective learning and human experience, the idea of good governance has changed over time. Scholars from a variety of fields, including political science, economics, and sociology, concur that good governance practices such as bolstering institutional capacity and reforming civil services are essential to sustainable development. Economists contend that efficient policy implementation, equitable taxation, and efficient fiscal management all depend on strong governance frameworks. Low public trust in fiscal institutions is frequently the cause of ineffective tax collection systems and inefficient administrative practices in developing countries. According to additional research, decentralized political systems typically collect taxes more successfully than centralized ones. Therefore, when political systems maintain equitable resource distribution, guarantee transparent resource mobilization, and encourage fiscal devolution, governance improves (Muzaffar et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023).

The majority of federal systems make a conscious effort to keep all governmental levels coordinated and efficient. The state's political structure, especially its legislative branch and ability to effectively handle political obstacles, is intimately linked to the idea of good governance. Institutions typically function better in decentralized political systems with decentralized power than in highly centralized ones. Since institutional strength and capacity determine the overall credibility of governance, the institutional role in policymaking and decision-making is an essential part of good governance. Efficiency is another requirement for effective governance, which means that organizations must be able to effectively mobilize both financial and human resources. In a similar vein, stability is crucial in determining whether organizations can continue to manage their resources effectively. Restructuring at every level of government is crucial when governance lacks defined goals or roles. In the end, building institutions based on good governance principles that support a harmonious relationship between the state and civil society is essential to strengthening democracy (Asif, 2024).

It continues to be a major worldwide issue that affects both developed and developing countries. One of the main obstacles to social progress and economic growth, according to the World Bank, is corruption, which manifests itself in the forms of extortion, embezzlement, fraud, and bribery (Awan et al., 2018). Political instability, inadequate civilian institutions, and excessive military spending all contribute to the problem in Pakistan. Pakistan's military, which is among the biggest in the world, has a significant impact on the country's economy, which exacerbates governance issues and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Siddiqa, 2017).

Institutional integrity in Pakistan is also compromised by cultural factors like social exclusion and ethnic diversity. The ethnolinguistic diversity of the nation makes economic

performance and institutional development more difficult. Excessive ethnic fragmentation, which measures the likelihood that two citizens are from different ethnic groups, frequently erodes institutions and fuels social divisions. Because they perceive systemic injustice, marginalized communities may stop adhering to formal norms, which would further undermine governance. These cultural elements hinder democratic advancement, erode public confidence, and deteriorate institutional quality when coupled with political leaders' unwillingness to challenge elite privilege or curtail military dominance (Amin, 2019).

Pakistan's corruption stems from the country's 1947 independence, which left it with numerous administrative and governance defects from the colonial era (Khan, 2016; Javaid, 2010). Systems of trade permits and industrial licensing during the 1950s encouraged rent-seeking behaviour. Nationalization policies in the 1970s opened up new channels for corruption, and corrupt activities by business, religious, and political elites increased in the 1980s (Javaid, 2010). Later decades saw a rise in problems like stock market manipulation, loan defaults, inefficiencies in State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), irregularities in privatization, and unequal distribution of subsidies (Sadiq, 2020).

In comparison to earlier decades, Pakistan under President Pervez Musharraf experienced a period of comparatively stable politics after the 1999 military takeover. But this time period was also full of major setbacks, such as the devastating earthquake in Kashmir and the general unrest brought on by Musharraf's contentious dismissal of the Chief Justice. After Musharraf lost power to a coalition government made up of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Yusuf Raza Gilani took over as prime minister of the new alliance government. In the past, military takeovers have frequently upended Pakistan's political order both before and after the 1990s, revealing ingrained class conflicts and power struggles. The military stepped in to overthrow civilian governments and impose more obedient ones whenever it felt that its control over political or economic matters was in danger. Open dialogue regarding the military's operations is still severely restricted in Pakistan, despite the introduction of certain reforms during military rule (Siddiqa, 2017).

Corruption is a major contributor to negative economic outcomes in developing nations because its detrimental effects are amplified by weak institutional structures (Adkisson & McFerrin, 2014). Even more than terrorism or poor educational systems, corruption stifles innovation (Nadeem et al., 2021). Foreign direct investment (FDI) is discouraged by both terrorism and corruption, which further damages Pakistan's economy. Furthermore, foreign aid, which accounts for a sizeable portion of Pakistan's GDP, frequently contributes to corruption because elites frequently divert funds meant for counterterrorism or humanitarian relief instead of getting them to those in need. Failures in governance and widespread corruption also affect other important sectors, including the judiciary, law enforcement, taxation, health, education, energy, procurement, and land management (Uroos et al., 2021).

Different viewpoints have different definitions of governance; some emphasize the state's role, while others emphasize society's involvement. The state still plays a crucial role in establishing national priorities, defining social goals, and directing the economy, even though governance in contemporary contexts depends more on cooperative policy

tools than on coercive control. In the end, the goal of governance is to balance the various demands and goals of the populace in order to create a social compact that advances the welfare of all (UNESCO, 2006).

One of the main pillars of human civilization has always been governance. Humans have created legal frameworks, decision-making processes, and regulations to maintain social order and peace since the earliest communal societies (Muzaffar et al., 2024). The global resurgence of democratic institutions, commonly known as the "third wave of democracy," has brought even more attention to how crucial good governance is to fostering inclusive democracies, advancing human development, and tackling the problems posed by globalization. According to the World Bank, governance is the use of political authority to run a country's affairs and maintain stability and accountability (Muzaffar et al., 2023).

Political culture frequently encourages corruption in Pakistan and many other developing nations. Pakistan's economic advancement and public trust have been severely harmed by white-collar crimes, a significant type of corruption. Pakistan's legal system handles white-collar crime by assessing current legislation, enforcement strategies, and implementation issues. The body of law addressing non-violent, profit-driven crimes committed by professionals or senior officials is known as "white-collar crime jurisprudence (Didwania, 2024)." White-collar crime, including corruption, remains one of Pakistan's biggest problems since it hinders economic growth, erodes trust in institutions, and threatens efficient government (Amos, Longpré, & Roos, 2024).

White-collar crime refers to illegal activities carried out by people with high social or professional status who abuse their positions for financial or personal benefit. Fraud, bribery, embezzlement, insider trading, and other financial offenses are examples of these crimes. The legal foundation for identifying, looking into, prosecuting, and punishing white-collar criminals is established by the jurisprudence surrounding this type of crime. Maintaining the integrity of government and financial institutions, protecting public funds, and encouraging moral behaviour in business and governance all depend on this area of the law (Reisig, Holtfreter, & Cullen, 2024).

One of the most serious and enduring issues facing Pakistan is corruption, which affects almost every aspect of public life, including politics, government, and business. Pakistan routinely scores poorly on international indices of anti-corruption performance, underscoring the widespread presence of corrupt practices in state institutions. Regulatory agencies, tax administration, law enforcement, and public procurement are among the major industries impacted. The ramifications are extensive: corruption deters foreign investment, slows economic expansion, and exacerbates social inequality by transferring public funds into private hands. Furthermore, corruption erodes public confidence, weakens institutional legitimacy, and erodes the rule of law, all of which contribute to political instability and social unrest (Michel, 2024).

With the passage of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) 1947, which was intended to stop misconduct among public servants, Pakistan's battle against white-collar crime got underway shortly after the country gained independence in 1947. By outlining the crimes associated with bribery and corruption, the act laid the groundwork for later anti-corruption laws. Early enforcement, however, was uneven and generally

unsuccessful. One prominent instance is the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case (1951), a significant political scandal that revealed power abuse and corruption at the highest echelons of government. Pakistan's early institutional and legal framework for fighting corruption had serious flaws that this incident exposed (Meyer, 2024).

Objectives:

- To ascertain the respondents' socio-economic characteristics.
- To examine the cultural, political, and socioeconomic elements that trigger corruption   in Pakistan.
- To assess the role of institutional weaknesses and lack of transparency in fostering corruption.
- To evaluate the impacts of corruption on governance and society.
- To give some suggestions to control corruption in Pakistan.

Methodology:

The qualitative research design has been used to gather qualitative data on the causes and implications of corruption as the study area was four districts namely Rawalpindi, Attock, Mianwali and Faisalabad for having reliable and trustable qualitative data. For capturing maximum variations, the focus group discussions have been conducted in the four districts. One focus group discussion having eight participants has been conducted from each tehsil, hence the total focus group discussions from four districts were eight and the total participants were sixty-four. A non-controversial place has been chosen for each tehsil for proceeding focus group discussion through creating a conducive and non-threatening environment. The focus group discussions were proceeded taking one by one theme asking from one-by-one participant. At the end of focus group discussion, opportunity has been given to the participants for interactive discussion on the theme design for attaining research objectives. Qualitative data has been recorded using tape recorder. Key notes have been taken by the researcher himself and assisted by the moderator for taking meaningful and trustable data. Data has been analysed using thematic analysis identifying similar and dissimilar views of the participants. In every theme respondent's as such views have been discussed and presented in the discussion to highlight the significance and importance of the research topic in their own words.

Results and Discussion:

Rule of law:

The qualitative findings indicate that one of the primary causes of corruption in Pakistan is the weak and inconsistent enforcement of the rule of law. Participants from various sectors emphasized that legal frameworks are often applied selectively or manipulated by individuals with political or financial power. Many respondents pointed out that law enforcement bodies and accountability institutions operate under significant political influence, leading to a system where the powerful enjoy impunity, while the less privileged face disproportionate punishment. As one participant remarked, *"The law only works for the poor if you're wealthy or well-connected, consequences rarely apply."* This widespread perception of unequal justice emerged as a major factor contributing to public mistrust in state institutions and the persistence of corruption.

Transparency:

The findings of the study reveal that a major factor driving corruption in Pakistan is the pervasive lack of transparency in governmental operations and decision-making processes. Participants repeatedly pointed out that public access to crucial information particularly in areas such as budgeting, procurement, and official appointments is severely restricted. Many respondents observed that important documents are either concealed or intentionally complicated, making it nearly impossible for citizens to ensure accountability. As one participant expressed, *"People have no idea where public funds are spent. Everything happens behind closed doors, and that's how corruption thrives."* This absence of openness was reported not only in high-level governmental dealings but also within everyday administrative practices, fostering continuous opportunities for bribery, favouritism, and abuse of power.

Accountability:

The findings show that one of the most commonly perceived causes of corruption in Pakistan is the absence of consistent and impartial accountability. Participants frequently highlighted that, although laws and anti-corruption bodies such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) are in place, they are widely viewed as politically influenced and ineffective. Many respondents noted that accountability efforts are applied selectively, often used as a tool against political rivals while those in power remain untouched. As one participant stated, *"Accountability in Pakistan isn't about justice it's about political revenge. That's why corruption never ends."* Additionally, several participants pointed out the lack of internal accountability within government departments, where junior staff members face punishment, but senior officials are rarely held responsible for their actions.

Meritocracy:

The study's findings reveal that the lack of meritocracy is a major factor contributing to corruption in Pakistan. Participants from various sectors emphasized that recruitment, promotions, and allocation of public resources are frequently determined by personal relationships, political favouritism, or bribery, rather than by merit or performance. Many respondents shared personal experiences where qualified and deserving individuals were overlooked simply because they lacked influential connections. As one government official explained, *"You can dedicate years of hard work, but without a bribe or recommendation, you'll never be promoted. It's discouraging and forces people to join the same corrupt system."* This pervasive sense of injustice has nurtured a culture of dependency on personal influence (sifarish), eroding professionalism and weakening institutional integrity.

Combating Corruption:

Participants pointed out that ineffective anti-corruption strategies and the lack of long-term political commitment are major reasons why corruption continues to persist in Pakistan. Many respondents expressed doubt about the credibility and effectiveness of existing anti-corruption institutions and policies, describing them as symbolic efforts often driven by political agendas rather than genuine reform. As one interviewee stated, *"Every new government launches anti-corruption drives, but nothing really changes because those in power are never held accountable."* This inconsistency in policy implementation, coupled with limited institutional capacity and weak law enforcement, has created conditions where

corruption thrives unchecked. Additionally, participants noted that public indifference and deep mistrust toward anti-corruption agencies further undermine efforts to achieve lasting reform.

Policy Implementation:

The findings of the study reveal that ineffective policy implementation is a major factor driving corruption in Pakistan. Participants consistently emphasized that, although anti-corruption laws and policies are well-formulated, they often fail in practice due to poor enforcement, bureaucratic inefficiency, and weak accountability within implementing institutions. As one respondent observed, *"We have excellent policies on paper, but they never translate into real action. This gap allows corruption to flourish."* Participants further pointed out that ambiguous regulations, overlapping responsibilities, and frequent policy shifts create confusion and open up loopholes that officials exploit for personal benefit, undermining the overall effectiveness of governance reforms.

Social Inequality:

The study's findings indicate that social inequality plays a crucial role in sustaining corruption in Pakistan. Participants explained that disparities in income, education, and social status create conditions where marginalized communities face barriers to accessing public services and opportunities, often forcing them to engage in corrupt practices out of necessity. As one participant stated, *"If you're poor and powerless, you have to pay bribes just to get basic services. The rich never have to they already have their own influence."* This unequal access to rights and resources fosters resentment and reinforces a cycle of favouritism, nepotism, and exploitation, allowing public resources to be diverted away from those most in need and deepening social and economic divides.

Inefficient Bureaucracy:

The findings reveal that bureaucratic inefficiency is a major factor contributing to corruption in Pakistan. Participants frequently pointed to delays, excessive red tape, and weak accountability as primary enablers of corrupt practices. As one respondent remarked, *"The system is so slow and complicated that people end up paying bribes just to get things done or access basic services."* Many emphasized that citizens' frustration with lengthy administrative procedures often leads them to rely on informal payments or personal connections to bypass obstacles. Additionally, the absence of clear performance benchmarks and inadequate oversight within government institutions fosters complacency, creating an environment where misuse of power becomes normalized.

Cultural Norms:

The findings indicate that deep-rooted cultural traditions play a major role in sustaining corruption in Pakistan. Participants explained that social practices like sifarish (seeking help through personal connections) and gift-giving are ingrained in everyday interactions, often blurring the boundary between social courtesy and corrupt behaviour. As one participant observed, *"In our culture, it's common to ask for favours or give something in return it's considered part of maintaining relationships."* This cultural tolerance normalizes corruption and makes it difficult to challenge through legal or institutional reforms alone. Respondents also emphasized that family and community loyalty often outweighs adherence to formal rules, reinforcing patterns of nepotism and preferential treatment.

Historical Legacy:

The findings suggest that Pakistan's colonial and post-independence legacy plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary corruption dynamics. Participants emphasized that the colonial administrative structure built on control, patronage, and centralized authority laid the groundwork for today's corrupt practices. As one respondent observed, *"The system we inherited was meant to rule people, not serve them. That mentality still exists, with those in power using their positions for personal and political gain."* This continuation of centralized power and weak institutional frameworks has fostered a culture of rent-seeking, favouritism, and impunity, embedding corruption deeply within Pakistan's political and bureaucratic systems.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, a complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors contributes to corruption in Pakistan. Corrupt practices have been able to firmly establish themselves within the governance framework due to a lack of institutional capacity and inefficient accountability systems. An atmosphere that is favourable to corruption is produced by political meddling, unbridled discretionary power, and a lack of transparency in government operations. Furthermore, a culture of impunity, in which criminals frequently avoid justice, is fostered by the judiciary's limited independence and sluggish legal proceedings. Economic issues like unemployment, poverty, and low pay in the public sector further encourage people to use bribery and abuse of power as a means of surviving. These inclinations are reinforced by cultural practices such as patron-client relationships, nepotism, and favouritism, and institutional integrity and efficiency are undermined when merit-based hiring and promotion procedures are absent.

Corruption has far-reaching effects on Pakistani governance. It erodes the efficiency of institutions, interferes with the provision of public services, and takes funds away from vital areas like infrastructure, education, and health. Citizens now have to deal with rising inequality and falling living standards as a result. Additionally, corruption increases the cost of doing business, discourages foreign investment, and exacerbates economic uncertainty. Most significantly, it erodes legitimacy and public trust, which widens the divide between the people and the government and undermines democratic governance. Pakistan must enact extensive institutional reforms, strengthen judicial and accountability systems, and promote civic engagement in order to overcome these obstacles. The country can only improve governance, restore public trust, and move closer to sustainable and equitable development by making consistent, multifaceted efforts.

Recommendations:

Strengthening institutional accountability mechanisms through improved transparency in public offices and consistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws is a key recommendation based on the qualitative findings. One of the main causes of corruption, according to the participants, is inadequate oversight. Therefore, future qualitative studies should look at ways to reorganize internal systems and institutional cultures to reduce the likelihood of corrupt activities. To encourage accountability and transparency, this involves looking into ways to improve public access to information, bolster whistleblower protections, and empower internal audit departments.

Addressing the sociocultural norms that support corruption is another important recommendation. The study discovered that a lot of corrupt practices have their origins in long-standing traditions like gift-giving, favouritism, and dependence on personal connections. Future qualitative studies should examine how people's tolerance or rejection of corruption is influenced by cultural values, social expectations, and community norms. When based on a more thorough comprehension of public sentiment and moral reasoning, initiatives such as media advocacy, public education campaigns, and community-based discussions can be more successful.

Lastly, it is advised that more research be done on the political and economic factors that contribute to corruption in Pakistan. Political patronage, job insecurity, and low pay in the public sector were found to be major contributors to corrupt behaviour. In order to comprehend how political pressures and economic limitations perpetuate corruption at different societal levels, future qualitative research should examine the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, public officials, and marginalized groups. Policymakers can use these insights to create focused, empirically supported reforms that deal with the root causes of corruption rather than just its outward signs.

By addressing the structural as well as cultural causes of corruption, these suggestions taken together seek to establish a more open, accountable, and efficient governance structure in Pakistan.

Note: This research article has been derived from my PhD research thesis titled (investigation of causes of corruption and its implications on governance in Punjab, Pakistan).

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