

Gallup Pakistan History Project - **Weekend Read 17** **‘Trust and Public Institutions in Pakistan: The Story of Winners and Laggards’**: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

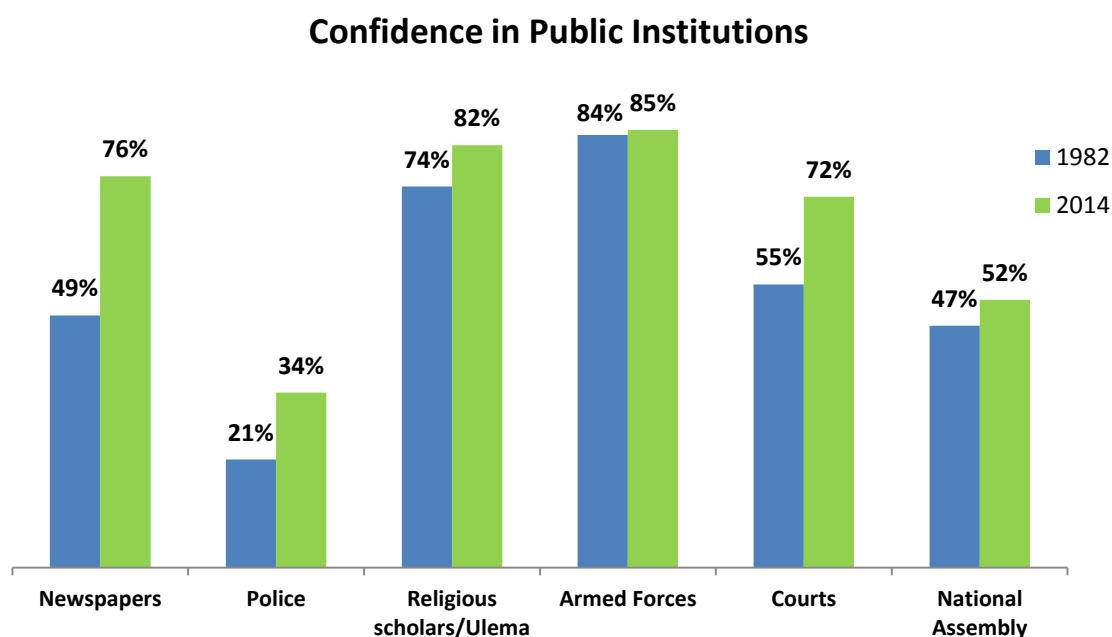
The “Pakistani narrative “– the evolution, structure, and functioning of the state – is often viewed, relayed and interpreted in unfavourable tones. This unfavourable assessment of the story of this country is popular both internationally, as well as domestically. In the international arena, the Pakistani state is often referred to through the vocabulary of dysfunction: failed state, fragile state, weak state etc. The country’s institutions are identified as sclerotic and flawed. The views of the people of Pakistan are perhaps of a greater concern and offer a more damaging and scathing appraisal of Pakistan’s story so far. Domestically, on the streets and in homes, the prognosis is not bright. Some bemoan the chronic inability of state institutions to rid themselves of corruption and inefficiency, while the society is blamed for being unsettled, chaotic and plagued by mistrust and all sorts of social ills. These bleak narratives are often based on observations of Pakistan’s state and public institutions, and their history of functional performance in society. The ability, strength, and efficiency of state and public institutions plays an important role in determining whether the state is able to perform its vital duties towards its citizens. The institutional infrastructure and its condition is an important assessment of the state’s narrative of success or failure. More critically, public trust in these institutions is the lifeblood of any state’s health and strength.

That the people of Pakistan are often seen and understood to view their country in pessimistic shades is an interesting and intriguing subject for empirical investigation. The aforementioned summation of how Pakistan’s story is told by its own people is something that Pakistanis observe and experience anecdotally. Chatting at a barber’s shop, mingling with guests in homes, or conversing with colleagues in professional spaces, the pessimistic and bleak assessment of Pakistan and its institutions is often taken for granted. Over time, such experiences have coalesced to create the following takeaway of Pakistan’s story so far: the country has moved from bad to worse since independence, and by and large, is heading towards a more desolate and grim future. This popular understanding of public opinion and verdict on the state’s performance is often taken as a baseline for an understanding of Pakistani peoples’ trust in the country’s institutions. However, there are shades of transformations in public opinions that are often overlooked and unfairly discounted in this history of Pakistan. An empirical and longitudinal assessment of public opinion and trust on Pakistani institutions provides an interesting and differing takeaway.

Gallup Pakistan’s archive of invaluable public opinion data since the 1980s is a critical resource for building an evidence-based understanding of Pakistan’s history; and more importantly, the people’s history of Pakistan. The organization has tracked public opinions for the last three decades on a range of interesting and critical issues that are a subject of this series of writings. This databank provides us with a solid foundation for looking at the changing tonalities in

people's opinions on countless issues and themes. Crucially, Gallup's databank also provides us with a reading of Pakistani peoples' trust in public institutions.

Gallup Pakistan's collection of public opinion questions captures the people of Pakistan's voices and opinions. The question of relevance here was first asked in 1982, and then repeated in 2014 – 32 years apart. Specifically, the question asked a nationally representative sample of Pakistanis the following question: Please tell us how much confidence do you have in the following institutions? The list of institutions covered here include: **Newspapers, Police, Religious clerics, Armed forces, Courts, and the National Assembly**. This question offers an interesting barometer for assessing the people of Pakistan's trust in major national institutions. The results of this longitudinal survey are shown in the Figure below:



This data in the last thirty years indicates an interesting picture of the public's confidence in major national institutions. Each institution deserves individual appraisal on the basis of this data. Overall though, data indicates that Pakistanis have greater confidence in public institutions today than thirty years ago.

In 1982, when the question was first asked to the people of Pakistan, two institutions inspired public confidence in their ability to serve the people and the state: religious scholars were entrusted with confidence by 74% of the population; while 84% of the people of Pakistan had confidence in the Armed Forces of the country. Other national institutions trailed these two significantly. 55% of the people had confidence in the courts – perhaps quite low for an institution tasked with implementing laws and establishing justice in society. Intriguingly, newspapers inspired confidence in 49% of the people, while 47% of the population expressed confidence in the National Assembly. And more critically, the police forces of Pakistan were trusted by only 21% of the country's population.

By 2014, the situation has changed significantly for most institutions. The Armed Forces (with 85% public confidence in 2014) and the religious scholars (with 82% of the public's expressing confidence) have retained their healthy public perception amongst the people of Pakistan. All other national institutions have gained – with some increasing the public's trust in their ability to deliver and perform significantly, while two improving slightly. The biggest increase in public confidence in 2014 was recorded for newspapers (76%) and the judiciary (72%). The National Assembly inspires confidence amongst 52% of the population, while the police forces have registered an increase in public confidence to 34%. Each individual institution merits its own brief longitudinal assessment based on this data.

That the Armed Forces retain the majority of Pakistanis' public trust is perhaps in line with expectations. In 1982, the country was firmly under General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, with the Army taking center stage, domestically, as well as regionally (vis-à-vis the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan). The Army's usurpation of democratic government in Pakistan, its powerful grip on the country's national institutions, its doctoring of Pakistan's narratives, and the condition of warfare next doors in Afghanistan, all played a role in inspiring overwhelming public confidence in 1982. In the last 32 years, this confidence has been carefully protected and nourished by the Armed Forces, and with success – as shown in this data. Nearly the same number of Pakistanis (85%), as in 1982 (84%), have the highest expressed the highest level of confidence in the Armed Forces. Notwithstanding, the misadventure of General Pervez Musharraf's confused dictatorship that perhaps hurt the Armed Forces' public perceptions for a brief period, the pole position amongst national institutions has been reacquired by the Armed Forces of Pakistan. This data reaffirms the predominant and preeminent position and space that the Armed Forces have attained in Pakistan.

Predictably, religious institutions have also retained and expanded their penetration and influence in society. General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in Pakistan has been widely assessed as inflicting critical damage to Pakistan's state structure. His approach to usurping and retaining control and power in Pakistan was steeped in the use and manipulation of religion, and in particular, the use of religious scholars. The state apparatus was intentionally used to co-opt, facilitate, and support the ascension of religious scholars as critical arbiters of national policies, social issues, and politics in the country. By 1982, the General had succeeded in altering public perceptions, as affirmed by this data – three quarters of the people in Pakistan (74%) expressed confidence in religious scholars. The consequence of this state manipulation and doctoring of religion in 1980s are aptly captured in this data. By 2014, religious scholars had secured and deepened their influence in Pakistani society. Thirty two years after receiving General Zia's patronage, religious scholars command the confidence of a substantial 82% of the population. This exalted status and elevated presence in Pakistani consciousness has become deeply-entrenched, and interestingly, nearly equals the public confidence expressed for the Armed Forces in 2014.

Amidst this discussion on national politics and policies over the last thirty years, it is perhaps crucial to shift focus on to the National Assembly. The National Assembly is the premier representative institution of the people's democratic aspirations. Crucially, it is the institutional symbol of democracy in the country. In 1982, Pakistan was firmly in the throes of General Zia's

dictatorship, which was built on the wreckage of democratic politics, and norms, and institutions left over by the imposition of Martial Law by General Zia. His regime intentionally and consciously set about using its firm grasp on national institutions and power to malign and erode the stature of democratic institutions in the country. When a nationally representative sample was asked in 1982 was asked to express the level of confidence in the National Assembly, only 47% expressed a healthy confidence in this vital democratic structure. This represented a significant dent in democratic foundations in Pakistan. The passage of three decades, and the vicissitudes of national political events and transformations, has only done little to correct this deficiency. While the National Assembly was trusted by 52% of the people of Pakistan in 1982, this performance trails that of the Armed Forces and religious infrastructure in the country significantly. Much more needs to be done in restoring the prestige and eminence of the National Assembly, which by extension, also applies to the state and long-term sustainability of democracy in the country.

The judiciary has gained significantly over the last thirty two years in terms of improving its public image. As the institution tasked with dispensing justice in the society, the judiciary plays a pivotal role in ensuring a state's infrastructural strength and durability. Unfortunately, interference and internal structural inefficiencies have plagued the judiciary's effective performance and sociopolitical and economic impact in the country. In 1982, under the shadows of a military regime that it had certified and allowed distort the Constitution, the judiciary was trusted by only 55% of the people of Pakistan. While it represents that majority's confidence, it is unfortunately low for an institution that should ideally have each citizen's complete confidence in its ability to dispense justice impartially and effectively. Crucially, the judiciary's public image has improved in the last thirty years; particularly on the back of the Lawyer's movement of the mid-00s, and the subsequent wave of judicial activism inspired by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's court across the judicial machinery. This impetus has translated in a significant gain in the form of increased public confidence. By 2014, the courts in Pakistan command the confidence of 72% of the people of Pakistan, which is a significant improvement. Given the institutional mandate and operational sphere of influence, the judicial infrastructure needs to do more to meet universal acclaim and confidence of the people of Pakistan.

Perhaps, the most interesting transformation during this period has occurred in the public confidence expressed in the performance and impact of newspapers in the country. Critically, only 49% of the people of Pakistan expressed a healthy level of trust in Pakistan's newspapers in 1982 – the sole medium for public communication, outside the direct control of the state at the time. This comparatively low level of public confidence could be driven by two explanatory variables functional at that point in time. First, much like most other national institutions, General Zia focused on harassing, imprisoning, and actively silencing independent-minded journalists in the country. At that point in time in Pakistan's history, newspapers were published under the intense and intrusive gaze of the state's censorship machinery. This might have depressed public confidence in newspapers across the board in Pakistan. Second, newspaper readership and circulation in Pakistan in 1982 was much lower than today. With a lower readership (literate) base, newspapers only reached particular segments of the society. Fast forward, thirty two years, and the landscape has changed dramatically. In 2014, 76% of the

people of Pakistan express strong confidence in national newspapers – a gain of 27% in the last thirty two years. Perhaps, this is a testament to the state of media in Pakistan today, where independent and an increasingly confident media has become a standard. There is also a strong possibility that newspaper here are taken as a symbol of media in general i.e. electronic and new media platforms, which have in particular gained tremendous public traction and penetration in the last decade and a half. Today, newspapers in particular, and the media industry in general, is a widely-trusted national institution in Pakistan – with more room to grow in the future.

And this brings us to the permanent laggard and epicenter of criticism of Pakistani state: the police forces. Police in Pakistan has become a symbol of the state's troubled and stunted evolution, and its perennial challenge to become effective, independent, impartial, and fair/just. Data recorded and analyzed for the last thirty two years in this analysis shows that Pakistan's police are that sole national institution that inspires the least confidence amongst the people of Pakistan. In 1982, a low 21% of the people expressed confidence in the police forces. By 2014, this public confidence had improved to 34% of Pakistanis who express confidence in the police forces of the country. The police force serves the people directly, and is often the state institution that most Pakistanis deal with most frequently. Police force's performance, operations, and efficiency are directly responsible for determining the administration of laws in the society, as well as protection of citizens' life and property. Inefficiency, corruption, and operational concerns are all troubling features of the Pakistani police forces. Critically, given the primacy of the police in exercising and operationalizing the state's authority and acting as its symbolic representative, inefficiency and malfeasance are highly likely to turn the people's opinions and attitudes sour towards the state and its performance.

Read together, this data provides somewhat counter-intuitive findings to what is commonly inferred as the dominant public opinion of Pakistanis about their state. While individually, some institutions lack public confidence, others enjoy high levels of public trust and confidence. More interestingly, over the last three decades Pakistanis' assessment of their level of trust on their country's institutions has actually increased. Despite the notable and oft-analyzed problems and chaotic events in the country in this time period, it appears that amidst this apparent turmoil, the country has moved in the right direction – especially when analyzed through the performance of institutions in the country. This intriguing finding bodes well for Pakistan, and implies that moving ahead, concerted efforts at reforming critical national institutions, can translate into meaningful gains in terms of the state's legitimacy, and evaluation of its performance by the citizenry.