



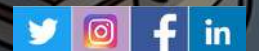
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PAKISTAN'S HYBRID MODEL OF GOVERNANCE: FROM  
BEING A FAILED STATE TO BECOMING RELEVANT  
BY  
LT GEN DP PANDEY, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS  
21 MAY 2026

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## **Introduction**

On 21 May 2026, Lt. Gen. Devendra Pratap Pandey (Retd.), a distinguished military officer and strategic analyst, delivered a guest lecture on the topic "Pakistan's Hybrid Model of Governance: From Being a Failed State to Becoming Relevant." The lecture offered a detailed and structured examination of how Pakistan has sustained itself as a functioning though deeply fragile state, despite facing persistent economic, political, and social challenges.

The speaker challenged the commonly held view that Pakistan is a "failed state" and instead argued that it should be understood as a "fragile state", one that is held together by a complex web of military authority, civilian politics, religious networks, and external patronage. The lecture was wide-ranging, covering Pakistan's internal governance structure, its economic vulnerabilities, its role in regional conflicts, and its prospects for long-term stability.

## **Pakistan's Governance Model**

Lt. Gen. Pandey opened by laying out what he described as Pakistan's "layered hybrid model" of governance. He identified four key pillars that together hold the state together and define how power is exercised in the country:

- The Military Establishment (Army and ISI)
- Civilian Political and Feudal Elites
- Religious-Political Networks (Madrasas, Islamist organisations)
- External Influences (UK, US, China, Gulf Countries)

According to the speaker, no single layer operates independently. Each supports and constrains the others. The military sits at the top of this structure and acts as the final arbiter of power. Civilian governments may come and go, but the army, particularly through the ISI and the GHQ, ensures that Pakistan's strategic direction remains firmly in its hands.

### **The Military's Central Role**

One of the most striking observations made by Lt. Gen. Pandey was about the sheer dominance of Pakistan's military in virtually every sphere of the country's life. He pointed out that Pakistan's army has either directly ruled the country or controlled it through proxy civilian governments for nearly 70% of its existence, roughly 33 years of direct rule and another 23 years of indirect control.

The military's reach extends well beyond the battlefield. Lt. Gen. Pandey explained that the army has built a vast economic empire, owning businesses in sectors ranging from real estate to manufacturing. Retired military officers regularly take up key civilian positions in bureaucracy, judiciary, and media, ensuring that the institution's interests are protected even when civilian governments are nominally in power. The military also receives around 25% of Pakistan's national budget, a massive share that limits investment in education, healthcare, and economic development.

The speaker noted that the military uses religious networks deliberately as a tool to maintain internal control, project narratives of ideological legitimacy, and pursue its doctrine of "strategic depth" vis-a-vis India and Afghanistan.

### **Civilian Political and Feudal Structures**

Lt. Gen. Pandey described Pakistan's civilian political space as being heavily dominated by feudal landlords who have historically controlled vast tracts of land and, consequently, the votes of large rural populations. Parties like the PML, PPP, and PTI all function within boundaries set by the military establishment. While civilian governments enjoy some degree of freedom in economic and administrative matters, foreign policy and security decisions are firmly outside their control.

He used the examples of Imran Khan and Shahbaz Sharif as illustrations of how civilian leaders function essentially as proxy rulers brought to power with military support and removed when they outlive their usefulness or step out of line. This pattern, the speaker argued, prevents genuine democratic development and creates a cycle of instability.

### **The Role of Religious Networks**

Perhaps one of the most insightful parts of the lecture was Lt Gen Pandey's analysis of how religious networks have been cultivated and used by both the military and political establishments over the past five decades. Madrasas across Pakistan provide not just religious education but also a steady supply of ideologically motivated recruits who can be mobilised for political causes or armed conflict when needed.

Religious groups serve the establishment in several ways they provide ideological legitimacy to military rule, mobilise mass street support during political crises, and act as a counterweight to dissenting political voices. The speaker noted that while these groups sometimes conflict with each other or with the military, the army manages these tensions carefully to preserve overall stability and maintain its own dominance.

### **External Influences: Pakistan as a Rentier State**

Lt Gen Pandey devoted considerable attention to the role of foreign powers in sustaining Pakistan. He traced this dependency back to the country's very origins noting that Pakistan was created by the British as a strategic buffer during the colonial era. After independence, the United States replaced Britain as the primary external patron, especially during the Cold War and later during the Global War on Terror.

Today, China has become Pakistan's most significant strategic and economic partner, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Gulf nations also provide substantial financial support, often tied to religious and strategic interests. The speaker described Pakistan as a "rentier state", one that survives not through productive economic output but through strategic rents extracted from its geopolitical position.

This dependency, he argued, is both a source of resilience and a major constraint on Pakistan's sovereignty. External powers prefer a fragile Pakistan over a stable one,

because fragility gives them leverage. Pakistan, in turn, plays these powers off against each other to secure aid and avoid collapse.

### **Geographic and Strategic Relevance**

A key argument made by Lt Gen Pandey was that Pakistan's continued relevance on the world stage is largely a product of geography rather than economic or political strength. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan serves as a crucial bridge connecting India, China, the Gulf, and Central Asian nations.

Its access to the Arabian Sea through the port of Gwadar, its proximity to Iran and Afghanistan, and its role as a conduit for trade and military logistics make it indispensable to multiple regional powers. The speaker pointed out that this strategic geography is, paradoxically, one of the reasons why global powers have little interest in Pakistan. Truly stabilising a functional, independent Pakistan would be harder to influence.

### **Economic and Social Challenges**

The speaker presented a sobering picture of Pakistan's domestic conditions. He highlighted that approximately 10% of the working population is unemployed, while around 25% of school-age children are out of school pointing to deep-rooted failures in human capital development. Pakistan has defaulted on IMF loan programmes 23 times, a record that reflects chronic fiscal mismanagement and an economy that has never achieved self-sufficiency.

Lt Gen Pandey noted that foreign aid and economic bailouts largely benefit the military and political elites rather than ordinary citizens. Corruption is endemic across all layers of governance. The country has, in effect, been exporting two things as unintended economic products labour migration and, more troublingly, terrorism.

### **Pakistan's Role in Regional Conflicts**

Lt Gen Pandey discussed Pakistan's complex and often contradictory involvement in regional geopolitics. He pointed out that Pakistan has, at various points, facilitated Iranian interests (including allowing Iranian aircraft to operate from its territory), deployed troops

to Saudi Arabia in support of Gulf security, and simultaneously maintained close ties with the United States.

Rather than reflecting a coherent strategic vision, these actions reflect what the speaker described as "tactical utility", Pakistan consistently acts in ways that maximise short-term benefits and ensure its continued relevance to as many external actors as possible. It positions itself as an indispensable player in every regional equation, even when this creates internal contradictions or damages long-term interests.

### **Internal Instability and Political Engineering**

The speaker also addressed the friction that arises between Pakistan's different governance layers. When the interests of the military, civilian politicians, and religious groups diverge, the result is political instability, which Pakistan has experienced repeatedly. The military manages these tensions by installing and removing civilian governments through what the speaker called "political engineering" a process that undermines democratic institutions and makes genuine political development very difficult.

Dissent is suppressed through arrests, intimidation, and media control. The military justifies its dominance through strategic narratives framing itself as the only institution capable of holding the country together against internal and external threats. This narrative, the speaker noted, has considerable public purchase precisely because of the genuine vulnerabilities Pakistan faces.

### **Future Prospects**

In concluding his substantive remarks, Lt Gen Pandey offered a measured but cautious outlook for Pakistan's future. He acknowledged that Pakistan is not on the verge of imminent collapse or external bailouts and the military's grip on power will continue to prevent outright failure for the foreseeable future. However, he was clear that the current model is not a path to genuine stability or prosperity.

For Pakistan to achieve lasting stability, it would need to reduce the military's dominance over civilian institutions, curb the political use of religious networks, build a self-sustaining

economy, and develop accountable governance structures. The speaker acknowledged that all of these reforms face enormous obstacles from entrenched vested interests to the deliberate preferences of external powers who benefit from Pakistan's continued fragility.

He concluded that meaningful change, if it comes at all, would take decades and would require a level of political will that is currently absent.

### **Question and Answer Session**

The formal lecture was followed by an interactive Q&A session in which the audience raised several important questions. Key themes that emerged during the discussion included Pakistan's management of its ethnic and sectarian fault lines, the military's role in shaping Pakistan's international image, and how Pakistan navigates the competing demands of its various external patrons. Lt Gen Pandey responded thoughtfully to each question, drawing on his extensive experience to provide contextual and nuanced answers.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Pakistan is best understood as a fragile state, not a failed one held together by a layered hybrid governance model.
- The military is the dominant institution in Pakistan, exercising control over governance, economy, foreign policy, and media for the vast majority of the country's history.
- Civilian political structures are subordinate to military authority and have never exercised full sovereignty.
- Religious networks have been institutionalised as a pillar of governance, providing ideological cover and mobilisation capacity to those in power.
- Pakistan's geopolitical location keeps it strategically relevant despite deep internal weaknesses.
- Foreign powers particularly China, the US, and Gulf nations deliberately sustain Pakistan's fragility to maintain leverage.

- Pakistan faces severe economic and social challenges that are unlikely to be addressed without fundamental structural reforms.
- Long-term stability is possible but would require decades of sustained political will, something that is currently absent.