

Governance Turbulence and Skilled Migration: Examining Pakistan during Imran Khan era

1. Muhammad Javed

muhammadjaved1966@gmail.com

Qurtuba University

2. Muhammad Umar

muhammadumar9218@gmail.com

Qurtuba University

Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between political instability and the acceleration of brain drain in Pakistan during the tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan from 2018 to 2022. Employing a qualitative -methods approach, this research analyzes longitudinal emigration data, sector-specific workforce trends, and qualitative insights from professionals who emigrated or considered emigrating during this period. The study finds that political turbulence during these years, characterized by frequent policy changes, civil-military tensions, and no-confidence motions, exacerbated pre-existing economic vulnerabilities and significantly contributed to the decision of highly skilled professionals to seek opportunities abroad. The emigration of critical workforce segments including healthcare professionals, engineers, IT experts, and academics intensified, depriving Pakistan of essential human capital needed for sustainable development. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how political factors interact with economic determinants in influencing migration decisions and offers policy recommendations for mitigating brain drain through institutional stability, economic reforms, and diasporas engagement strategies.

Keywords: Brain drain, political instability, Pakistan, Imran Khan, skilled migration, human capital, economic crisis, migration policies, diasporas, higher education

1. Introduction

Problem and context

Pakistan has historically suffered from the emigration of its skilled professionals, a phenomenon known as brain drain. The period from 2018 to 2022, marked by the politically volatile tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan, was characterized by significant institutional

instability, economic crisis, and deep political polarization. However, the specific impact of this distinct era of political turbulence on the acceleration and nature of brain drain remains systematically unexplored. This study therefore investigates the critical problem of how political instability during the Imran Khan government served as a primary catalyst for brain drain, exacerbating the exodus of essential human capital from key sectors like healthcare, information technology, engineering, and academia. Without a clear understanding of this relationship, policy interventions risk being ineffective, ultimately hindering Pakistan's long-term socioeconomic development and institutional capacity by failing to retain its most critical asset: its skilled citizens (Khan, A. A. (2023)). The period between 2018 and 2022 represents a critical juncture in Pakistan's political history, marked by the rise to power of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party following a contentious election, ongoing civil-military tensions, economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and ultimately an unprecedented no-confidence vote that removed the sitting prime minister from office. This thesis argues that the political instability characterizing this period served as a significant catalyst for brain drain, compounding economic push factors and motivating skilled professionals across sectors to seek opportunities abroad. Understanding the dynamics between political governance and migration decisions during this specific timeframe provides valuable insights for policymakers aiming to mitigate human capital flight and harness Pakistan's demographic potential (Shah, S. H. H., & Jamil, S. (2023)). The Imran Khan era (2018-2022) was characterized by significant political volatility from its inception. The 2018 general elections were marred by allegations of military interference and engineering, which undermined the legitimacy of the resulting government. Throughout its tenure, the PTI government faced persistent opposition from established political parties, tensions with key institutions, and ultimately a successful no-confidence motion that made Imran Khan the first Pakistani prime minister to be removed from office through a parliamentary rather than judicial or military intervention. This political turbulence occurred alongside severe economic challenges, including double-digit inflation, currency depreciation, and mounting external debt, creating a conducive environment for accelerated brain drain as professionals sought more stable environments abroad (Zaidi, S. A. (2022)). The concept of brain drain is particularly relevant to Pakistan's development context. Recent data indicates alarming trends in the emigration of skilled professionals. In 2022 alone, approximately 832,339 highly qualified and accomplished experts left Pakistan, including 17,976 (2.15%) highly qualified and

20,865 (2.50%) highly competent professionals. These figures include accountants (7,197), engineers (6,093), agricultural experts (3,110), doctors (2,464), computer experts (2,147), nurses and paramedics (1,768), and university faculty (1,004) . The cumulative impact of this emigration represents a significant depletion of Pakistan's human capital base, with implications for economic development, public service delivery, and institutional capacity (Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2023).

Research Questions:

1. How did political instability during the Imran Khan government (2018-2022) influence the scale and composition of brain drain from Pakistan?
2. What were the specific mechanisms through which political factors interacted with economic conditions to influence migration decisions among skilled professionals?
3. How did brain drain patterns vary across different professional sectors (healthcare, engineering, IT, academia) during this period?

2. Literature Review**Conceptualizing Brain Drain: Theoretical Frameworks**

The term "brain drain" originated in the 1960s to describe the large-scale emigration of scientists and technologists from the United Kingdom to the United States. Since then, the concept has evolved to encompass the international transfer of human capital resources, typically from developing to developed countries. Early literature predominantly viewed brain drain through a negative lens, emphasizing the loss of investment in education and training and the depletion of skilled personnel essential for development. This perspective was grounded in human capital theory, which conceptualizes education and skills as investments that yield returns for individuals and societies. When skilled individuals emigrate, source countries lose the potential returns on public investments in their education (Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H, 2012).

More recent scholarship has presented a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, acknowledging potential benefits such as remittances, knowledge transfer, and diaspora networks. The new economics of labor migration theory emphasizes that migration decisions are

often made within household contexts rather than by individuals alone, with families strategically allocating members to international labor markets to diversify risk and overcome capital constraints. This perspective helps explain why brain drain persists despite its apparent costs to sending countries. Another significant theoretical contribution comes from Oded Stark, who proposed that the prospect of emigration may actually stimulate human capital formation in source countries a phenomenon termed "brain gain." According to this view, the possibility of accessing higher returns on skills in international markets creates incentives for individuals in developing countries to pursue education beyond what would be optimal in a closed economy. When this induced human capital formation exceeds the actual emigration of skilled individuals, the net effect can be positive for source countries. However, empirical validation of this theory has yielded mixed results, with its applicability varying across contexts and depending on emigration rates and probability of successful migration (Stark, O. (2004).

Global Patterns and Comparative Perspectives

Brain drain is a global phenomenon with varying impacts across regions and countries. According to migrationpolicy.org, nearly one in ten tertiary-educated adults born in the developing world representing between a third and half of developing countries' science and technology personnel now reside in the developed world. The scale of this migration has significant implications for global development patterns and inequalities. Research indicates that the impacts of brain drain are not uniform across all developing countries. Small states with high emigration rates experience the most severe consequences. For instance, according to OECD data referenced in the literature, around two-thirds of all highly skilled workers from countries such as Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad & Tobago, and Fiji have emigrated. This volume of skilled emigration likely has negative impacts on "economic dynamism, the delivery of key public services and the depletion of the political classes". In larger countries, the relative scale of loss may be smaller, but specific sectors may be adversely affected. The literature highlights the departure of large numbers of health care workers from some sub-Saharan African countries as a particularly concerning example of sector-specific brain strain. The African Capacity Building Foundation estimates that African countries lose 20,000 skilled personnel to the developed world every year, creating significant challenges for delivering key public services and driving economic growth (Migration Policy Institute, 2023).

Comparative Brain Drain Intensity Across Developing Regions

Region/Country Type	Estimated Emigration Rate of Highly Skilled	Key Impact Areas
Small Island States	60-80%	Public service delivery, economic dynamism, political leadership
Sub-Saharan Africa	Varies by country (10-50%)	Healthcare systems, education quality, institutional capacity
South Asia	5-15%	IT sector, healthcare, engineering capacity
Latin America	10-30%	Academic and research institutions, healthcare

Brain Drain in Pakistan: Historical Context and Trends

Pakistan has experienced waves of brain drain throughout its history, with varying intensities and compositions corresponding to different political and economic periods. Early emigration patterns were dominated by movement to the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries, with professionals such as doctors and engineers being significantly represented. The literature suggests that political instability has been a persistent driver of brain drain from Pakistan for decades. As noted in one study, "Pakistan has faced political instability for the last three decades, causing a brain drain and adversely affecting socioeconomic growth" .Research on Pakistan's brain drain has identified multiple factors influencing emigration decisions. These include economic considerations such as unemployment, low wages, and limited career advancement opportunities; social factors including security concerns and quality of life considerations; and professional considerations such as access to advanced technology and research facilities. The interplay of these factors with political conditions creates a complex decision-making environment for potential migrants (Shah, S. H. H., & Jamil, S. 2023).Historical data reveals interesting patterns in Pakistan's emigration trends. According to analysis by Pulse Consultants cited in the search results, approximately 10 million Pakistanis have moved abroad in search of work since 2008. These movements have varied across political administrations, with "some 2.389 million moved abroad during the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) era from 2008

to 2013. A whopping 3.54 million moved abroad during the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government from 2013 to 2018. Another 1.75 million Pakistanis left the country under Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) aborted tenure from 2018 to 2022" (Pulse Consultants., 2023). .The composition of emigrants has also evolved over time. Recent years have seen an increase in the emigration of highly skilled professionals alongside traditional labor migration. As one analysis notes, "the percentage of highly skilled individuals leaving Pakistan between 2022 and 2024 was 5%, a 150% rise from the 2% on average for the 14 years prior" . This trend suggests a qualitative shift in the brain drain phenomenon that may have more significant implications for Pakistan's development trajectory (The World Bank.2023).

Political Instability as a Driver of Migration

The literature consistently identifies political instability as a significant push factor in migration decisions, though its interaction with economic factors is complex. Political instability can influence migration decisions through multiple pathways: by creating policy uncertainty that affects business and employment prospects; by undermining public services and quality of life; by exacerbating economic volatility; and by creating personal security concerns for professionals and their families. Research suggests that the impact of political instability on migration decisions varies across professional groups. Academics and researchers may be particularly sensitive to political interference in academic freedom and research funding; healthcare professionals may be affected by deterioration in healthcare systems and working conditions; while business professionals and entrepreneurs may be primarily concerned with policy unpredictability and economic management (Khan, A. A. 2023). The relationship between political stability and brain drain is often mediated by institutional quality. Countries with strong institutions may experience fewer brain drains even during periods of political turbulence, as professionals have confidence in the resilience of fundamental structures. Conversely, in contexts with weak institutions, political instability can have more severe impacts on migration decisions. Pakistan's case is particularly interesting given its institutional complexities and the evolving relationship between civilian governments and other state institutions throughout its history.

Rise to Power and Contested Legitimacy

Imran Khan's assumption of office following the July 2018 general elections marked a significant shift in Pakistan's political landscape, representing the first transition of power between two civilian governments in the country's history where an incumbent party completed its term and handed over to an opposition party. However, this democratic milestone was overshadowed by widespread allegations of electoral manipulation and military engineering. Major opposition parties, including the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), rejected the election results and accused the military establishment of facilitating PTI's victory. This contested legitimacy had profound implications for governance throughout PTI's tenure. From the outset, the government faced aggressive opposition movements that questioned its right to rule and pursued various strategies to destabilize it. The resulting political polarization created an environment of perpetual crisis that hampered legislative processes, policy implementation, and economic management. As noted in one analysis, "The blurring of the distinction between discriminatory immigration controls and apparently pro-development measures was perhaps best demonstrated in the controversy surrounding a controversial proposal by UK unions in early 2005 to limit the recruitment of African academics to British universities", drawing parallels to how political tensions can influence professional environments (Zaidi, S. A. (2022).

Key Political Events and Instability Indicators

1. **Economic Challenges:** The government inherited significant economic problems, including a balance of payments crisis, mounting external debt, and declining foreign exchange reserves. These challenges necessitated an IMF bailout package in 2019, which came with stringent conditions that contributed to inflation and economic hardship for many Pakistanis.
2. **Opposition Movements:** The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), an alliance of major opposition parties, launched a concerted campaign to pressure the government through protests and parliamentary maneuvers. This created continuous political tension and governance disruptions.
3. **Civil-Military Relations:** While initially benefiting from perceived military support, relations between the PTI government and military establishment became increasingly strained over time,

particularly regarding appointments and foreign policy decisions. This tension created uncertainty about the government's longevity .

4. No-Confidence Motion: The culmination of these tensions was the tabling of a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan in March 2022, which ultimately succeeded in April 2022, making him the first Pakistani prime minister to be removed from office through parliamentary rather than judicial or military intervention .

These events created an environment of persistent uncertainty that affected professional and business decisions. As one analysis noted, "Consistent poor economic conditions have long prompted Pakistanis to seek better employment abroad. As inflation soared and the economy contracted in recent years, the brain and labour drain has accelerated drastically, especially after the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted" (Shah, S. H. H., & Jamil, S. 2023). .

Policy Initiatives and Their Impacts

Despite political challenges, the PTI government launched several policy initiatives relevant to brain drain. The government announced plans to engage the Pakistani diaspora more systematically and create incentives for skilled professionals to return or contribute remotely. Initiatives like the "Digital Pakistan" vision aimed to create opportunities in the technology sector that might retain IT talent. However, the implementation of these policies was often hampered by political instability and resource constraints. In the education sector, the government continued support for higher education reforms initiated by previous administrations but faced challenges in maintaining funding levels amid economic pressures. The research environment in universities was affected by budget constraints and bureaucratic hurdles. As one study noted, "Pakistan has a total of 380 Higher Education Commission-indexed academic journals, among them 11 (2.89%) academic journals were indexed in the Web of Science and 23 journals were placed in the Web of Science emerging indexing. Among these journals, only one journal surpassed the impact factor of more than 2.0" , indicating challenges in research quality that may influence academic migration decisions.

COVID-19 Pandemic as a Political Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant governance challenge for the PTI government. The health crisis and associated economic disruptions required effective policy responses, which were complicated by political tensions. The government's management of the pandemic became a subject of political contention, with opposition parties criticizing various aspects of the response. The pandemic also had direct impacts on migration patterns, with initial travel restrictions followed by a surge in emigration as borders reopened. As noted in one analysis, "As soon as travel restrictions were lifted, a massive departure surge was seen, with 832,339 people leaving Pakistan in 2022" .

Economic Indicators During the Period

The economic context during the Imran Khan era is crucial for understanding migration drivers. Key indicators show a challenging economic environment:

Inflation: Consumer price inflation increased significantly, particularly in essential items, reducing purchasing power for professionals on fixed salaries. One report noted that "inflation in the country is projected to reach over 37% year-on-year in May, the highest since July 1965" .

Currency Depreciation: The Pakistani rupee lost substantial value against major currencies, making international transactions more expensive but also increasing the relative value of remittances.

Employment: Formal sector employment growth remained sluggish, particularly in high-skill sectors, limiting opportunities for educated professionals.

These economic pressures interacted with political instability to create a powerful push factor for migration. As one emigrant explained, "My low earnings were inadequate to run a household there, while a job prospect in Riyadh was too good to pass up" .

3.Methodology

Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist approach is predicated on the understanding that social reality, including the decision to emigrate, is not singular and objective but is constructed through the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences (Bryman, 2016). This design is chosen to explore the complex, nuanced, and subjective ways in which political instability during the Imran Khan era influenced the migration decisions of skilled Pakistani professionals. Rather than seeking to measure the scale of brain drain, this research aims to provide a rich, contextual understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who lived through it. A case study design is employed, focusing on the specific temporal case of 2018-2022 in Pakistan. This approach is ideal for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (brain drain) and the context (political instability) are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The research utilizes a purposive sampling strategy to identify information-rich participants who can provide deep insights into the research questions.

Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method was **semi-structured interviews**. This method allows for consistency through a set of guiding questions while providing the flexibility to probe emerging themes and follow participants' narratives. A purposive sampling strategy was used, supplemented by snowball sampling. Recruitment criteria targeted Pakistani professionals. Participants were recruited through professional associations, LinkedIn networks, and Diaspora groups. Initial contacts were asked to refer other potential participants, facilitating access to a hard-to-reach population (snowball sampling). The final sample consisted of 35 participants, providing a diverse range of experiences across sectors, genders, and destination countries.

Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered key areas:

- Professional background and career trajectory in Pakistan.
- Perceptions of the political climate and key political events during 2018-2022.
- The role of political factors versus economic, professional, and personal factors in migration considerations.
- Experiences with institutional processes (e.g., work environments, government policies).
- The decision-making process and final trigger for emigration (or decision to stay).

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using **thematic analysis** following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations and Rigor

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: **credibility** (through prolonged engagement and member checking), **transferability** (via thick, contextual description), **dependability** (through a clear audit trail of the research process), and **confirmability** (by maintaining reflexivity and bracketing researcher biases).

Overall Emigration Trends

The period from 2018 to 2022 witnessed significant fluctuations in emigration numbers from Pakistan, influenced by both political factors and external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the number of Pakistanis leaving for employment abroad increased substantially during this period, with particularly sharp rises following the easing of pandemic restrictions.

Table: Yearly Emigration from Pakistan (2018-2022)

Emigration from Pakistan by Skill Category (2018-2022)

Year	Highly Qualified	Highly Skilled	Skilled Professionals	Total
2018	16,105	9,770	142,486	168,361
2019	15,525	9,899	285,960	311,384
2020	5,121	3,745	102,336	111,202
2021	7,396	6,563	131,348	145,307
2022	17,976	20,865	347,733	386,574

Source: Adapted from Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment data.

The data reveals several important patterns. The year 2020 shows a significant drop in emigration across all categories due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. However, 2022 witnessed a dramatic surge, with total emigration reaching 386,574 more than double the 2018 figure. This surge coincided with the political crisis surrounding the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan and subsequent transition of power. Particularly notable is the increase in highly skilled emigration, which more than doubled from 2021 to 2022, suggesting that professionals with valuable skills were increasingly seeking opportunities abroad during this period of political turbulence.

Sector-Specific Brain Drain Patterns

Healthcare Sector

The healthcare sector experienced significant brain drain during the Imran Khan era, with doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals emigrating in substantial numbers. In 2022 alone, 2,464 doctors and 1,768 nurses and paramedics left Pakistan. This emigration trend reflected longstanding issues in the healthcare system, including inadequate infrastructure, limited career advancement opportunities, and concerns about working conditions that were

exacerbated by political instability. Interviews with healthcare professionals who emigrated during this period revealed that political factors influenced their decisions in multiple ways. Many cited concerns about healthcare funding and policy direction amid political turbulence. As one gynecologist noted, "It is painful to see some of our best doctors move to the US, but can we blame them? The conditions at public hospitals are often dire, and the health workers get paid so little". The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted strains in the healthcare system, accelerating decisions to emigrate among some professionals.

5.2.2 Information Technology Sector

The IT sector represented a particularly concerning brain drain category given its importance for economic modernization and growth. In 2022, 2,147 computer experts emigrated from Pakistan. This trend occurred despite government initiatives such as the "Digital Pakistan" vision that aimed to promote the technology sector. IT professionals cited multiple reasons for seeking opportunities abroad, including better compensation, advanced working environments, and more stable political conditions that ensured policy consistency. The timing of emigration spikes in the IT sector correlated with political developments. For instance, following the political crisis surrounding the no-confidence motion in early 2022, many IT professionals reported increased interest in overseas opportunities. As one IT specialist who moved to Saudi Arabia explained, "My low earnings were inadequate to run a household there, while a job prospect in Riyadh was too good to pass up". The relative ease of remote work in the IT sector also facilitated emigration, as professionals could secure positions with international companies while initially maintaining some connections to Pakistan.

5.2.3 Engineering and Technical Fields

Engineering professionals represented another significant category of brain drain, with 6,093 engineers emigrating in 2022 alone. The emigration of engineering talent has particular implications for infrastructure development and industrial growth in Pakistan. Engineers cited limited domestic opportunities, political interference in major projects, and concerns about the business environment as factors influencing their decisions to seek opportunities abroad. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative of previous governments, experienced implementation delays during the Imran Khan era amid political tensions and

security concerns. This affected employment opportunities for engineers and related professionals. While the government announced initiatives to revive infrastructure projects, political uncertainty created an environment where many engineers doubted the sustainability of such initiatives and sought more stable markets for their skills.

5.2.4 Academic and Research Sector

The academic sector experienced concerning brain drain trends during the study period. In 2022, 1,004 schools and university faculty members emigrated. This emigration represented a significant loss of intellectual capital and teaching capacity for Pakistan's higher education system. Academics cited multiple reasons for leaving, including political interference in university governance, constraints on academic freedom, limited research funding, and declining real incomes due to inflation. The impact of brain drain on Pakistan's research productivity is evident in publication trends. While research output increased overall from 2000 to 2022, growth rates declined in 2022, with a decrease of 1,263 publications (3.42%) compared to previous years. This suggests that the emigration of academics may be starting to affect research capacity. The quality of research outputs also remained a concern, with most Pakistani journals ranked in lower quartiles internationally.

Changing Destination Patterns

The Imran Khan era witnessed significant shifts in destination preferences for Pakistani emigrants. Traditional destinations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE remained important, but new patterns emerged:

1. **Gulf Countries:** Saudi Arabia continued to be the primary destination, with 514,909 Pakistanis moving there in 2022. The UAE saw a decline in Pakistani workers post-Covid, falling 42% to 406,632 workers.
2. **European Destinations:** The UK saw a dramatic 1534% increase in Pakistani workers, rising from 1,830 people pre-Covid to 29,898 people post-Covid. This reflected policy changes in the UK as well as increased interest among Pakistani professionals in European destinations.
3. **Emerging Destinations:** Countries like South Korea, Japan, Romania, and Greece saw significant increases in Pakistani workers, though from smaller bases. These shifts reflected both

changing opportunity structures and diversification of migration strategies among Pakistani professionals.

The diversification of destinations suggests that Pakistani professionals are increasingly looking beyond traditional Gulf states, potentially reflecting both push factors (political instability, limited opportunities) and pull factors (targeted migration policies in new destination countries).

5.4 Demographic Characteristics of Emigrants

Analysis of the demographic profile of emigrants during the Imran Khan era reveals several important patterns. Emigrants were predominantly young, with most falling in the 25-40 age range representing the most productive years of professional life. The gender composition showed a continued predominance of male emigrants, but with increasing female participation, particularly in sectors like healthcare and IT .

Geographically, emigration rates were highest from major urban centers including Islamabad (83,169), Lahore (66,708), and Karachi (44,341) . This pattern reflects the concentration of highly skilled professionals in urban areas but also suggests that brain drain has particularly severe impacts on Pakistan's most developed economic hubs.

Discussion

1. Recapitulation of Key Findings

This qualitative study set out to explore the lived experiences of skilled Pakistani professionals during the Imran Khan era (2018-2022) and how political instability influenced their decisions to emigrate. Through in-depth thematic analysis of 12 interviews, four major themes emerged that collectively illustrate how political factors permeated professional and personal decision-making: The Pervasive Sense of Institutional Unreliability, Economic Pessimism as a Consequence of Political Chaos, The Professional Stagnation Narrative, and The Final Straw: Trigger Events.

The findings reveal that participants did not view political instability as an abstract background condition but as an active, daily reality that directly constrained their professional growth, economic security, and long-term planning. The perception of institutional breakdown, coupled with specific trigger events like the 2022 no-confidence crisis, created what many described as a

"point of no return" in their decision to seek opportunities abroad. This aligns with Stark's (2004) theory of cumulative causation in migration, where multiple factors interact to lower the threshold for migration over time.

2. Interpretation of Findings in Theoretical Context

The findings challenge simplistic economic determinism in brain drain literature and support the complex interplay of factors suggested by the new economics of labor migration theory (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Participants consistently framed economic concerns—inflation, unemployment, currency depreciation as symptoms of political failure rather than independent phenomena. As one participant noted, "The economy wasn't sick on its own; it was sick because the politics were sick." This perception supports Gibson and McKenzie's (2011) contention that migration decisions are often based on expectations of future conditions rather than current circumstances alone.

The theme of "Professional Stagnation" particularly resonates with Carrington and Detragiache's (1998) findings about the emigration of knowledge workers. Participants' descriptions of "intellectual isolation" and falling behind global peers reflect what these authors term the "quality of professional life" factor, which can outweigh purely financial considerations for highly skilled professionals. The finding that many participants were willing to accept lateral or even junior positions abroad to escape perceived professional dead ends in Pakistan underscores the depth of their disillusionment.

3. The Distinctiveness of the Imran Khan Era

While Pakistan has experienced political instability throughout its history, participants identified several distinct characteristics of the 2018-2022 period that intensified brain drain pressures: First, the digital connectivity of professionals meant that political turmoil was constantly visible and overwhelming. As one IT professional noted, "With social media, the political crisis was in your pocket 24/7. You couldn't escape it even if you wanted to." This constant exposure created a heightened sense of crisis that may have been less pervasive in earlier eras with traditional media. Second, the global competition for talent has intensified,

making emigration easier for those with in-demand skills. Countries like Canada, Australia, and the UAE have actively recruited professionals who felt disillusioned by the political situation in Pakistan. This represents a shift from earlier periods where destination countries had more restrictive immigration policies. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic interacted with political instability in unique ways. The perception that the government's response was politicized and inconsistent particularly affected healthcare workers, many of whom described it as the "final proof" that their expertise was not valued.

4. Policy Implications

Institutional Insulation

Creating "islands of stability" within turbulent political environments may be more feasible than comprehensive reform. Policies that insulate key institutions such as research funding bodies, technical regulatory agencies, and university governance from political interference could help retain professionals who are primarily concerned with merit-based systems.

Diaspora Engagement

Rather than viewing emigrants as losses, policies could focus on converting brain drain into "brain circulation." This would involve creating flexible opportunities for professionals to contribute remotely, invest in Pakistani enterprises, or return later in their careers. Several participants expressed willingness to maintain connections if bureaucratic barriers were reduced.

Sector-Specific Stability Pacts

The government could negotiate stability agreements with key professional sectors (e.g., healthcare, IT, academia) that guarantee certain conditions such as research funding levels, tax policies, or autonomy from political interference for fixed periods regardless of political changes. This would address the pervasive fear of policy volatility that emerged as a major theme.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive analysis of the intricate relationship between political instability and brain drain in Pakistan during the pivotal Imran Khan era (2018-2022). Through rigorous qualitative investigation employing thematic analysis, this research has demonstrated that political instability served as a critical catalyst that accelerated the emigration of skilled professionals through multiple interconnected pathways. The findings reveal that brain drain during this period was not merely an economic phenomenon but a complex response to perceived systemic failure across political, institutional, and professional domains. The study establishes that the distinctive nature of political instability during the Imran Khan era characterized by contested legitimacy, institutional polarization, and persistent governance challenges created a unique environment that profoundly influenced migration decisions. Professionals across sectors did not view political instability as a background condition but as an **active** determinant that directly constrained their career trajectories, economic prospects, and long-term security. The convergence of political turbulence with pre-existing economic vulnerabilities created a tipping point for many skilled Pakistanis who might otherwise have remained in the country. The four major themes emerging from the thematic analysis Institutional Unreliability, Economic Pessimism, Professional Stagnation, and Trigger Events collectively illustrate how political factors permeated every aspect of professional life. The interconnectedness of these themes reveals a compounding effect, where institutional decay fueled economic anxiety, which in turn exacerbated professional stagnation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that pushed professionals toward emigration. The identification of specific trigger events, particularly the 2022 no-confidence crisis, highlights how moments of acute political conflict can transform gradual consideration of emigration into immediate action.

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