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Analytical Review Article

CIVIL–MILITARY IMBALANCE AND DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN

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Abstract

Civil–military imbalance remains a critical challenge in many developing and transitional states. When military institutions dominate political authority and align with elite power structures, democratic institutions weaken, governance becomes distorted, and reform processes stagnate. This article explains how military dominance and elite capture influence political systems, limit accountability, and obstruct sustainable democratic development.

Running title: Civil–military relations, democratic breakdown, military dominance in politics

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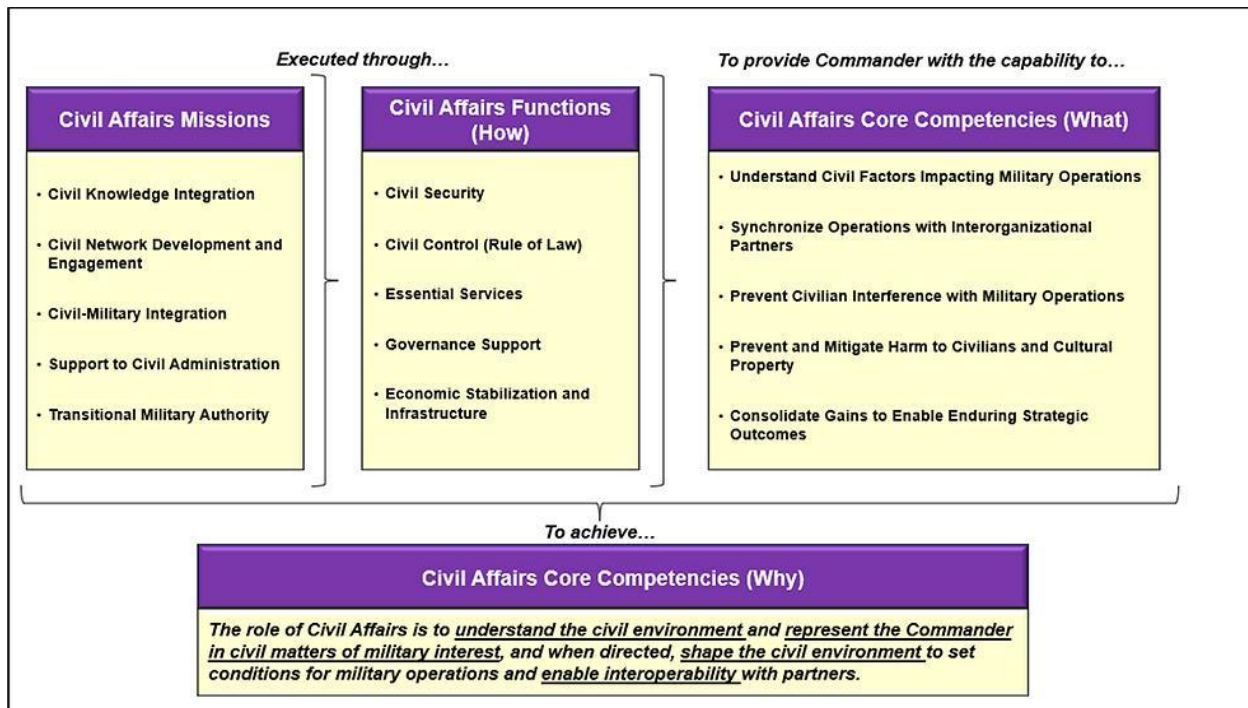
Introduction

A balanced relationship between civilian leadership and military institutions is essential for a functioning democracy. In an ideal system, the military operates under civilian control, ensuring national security without interfering in political governance. However, in many countries, this balance is disrupted. Military dominance, often supported by political and economic elites, leads to weakened democratic institutions and unstable governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative review approach, synthesizing academic literature, policy reports, and historical analyses from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. It includes peer-reviewed research and institutional reports from organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank, focusing on publications from 2010 to 2026.

Conceptual Framework: Civil–Military Relations



Civil–military relations describe the distribution of power between civilian authorities and the military.

- **Balanced system:** Civilian supremacy, institutional accountability
- **Imbalanced system:** Military intervention in politics, reduced transparency

In imbalanced systems, the military often justifies its role through narratives of national security, stability, or crisis management.

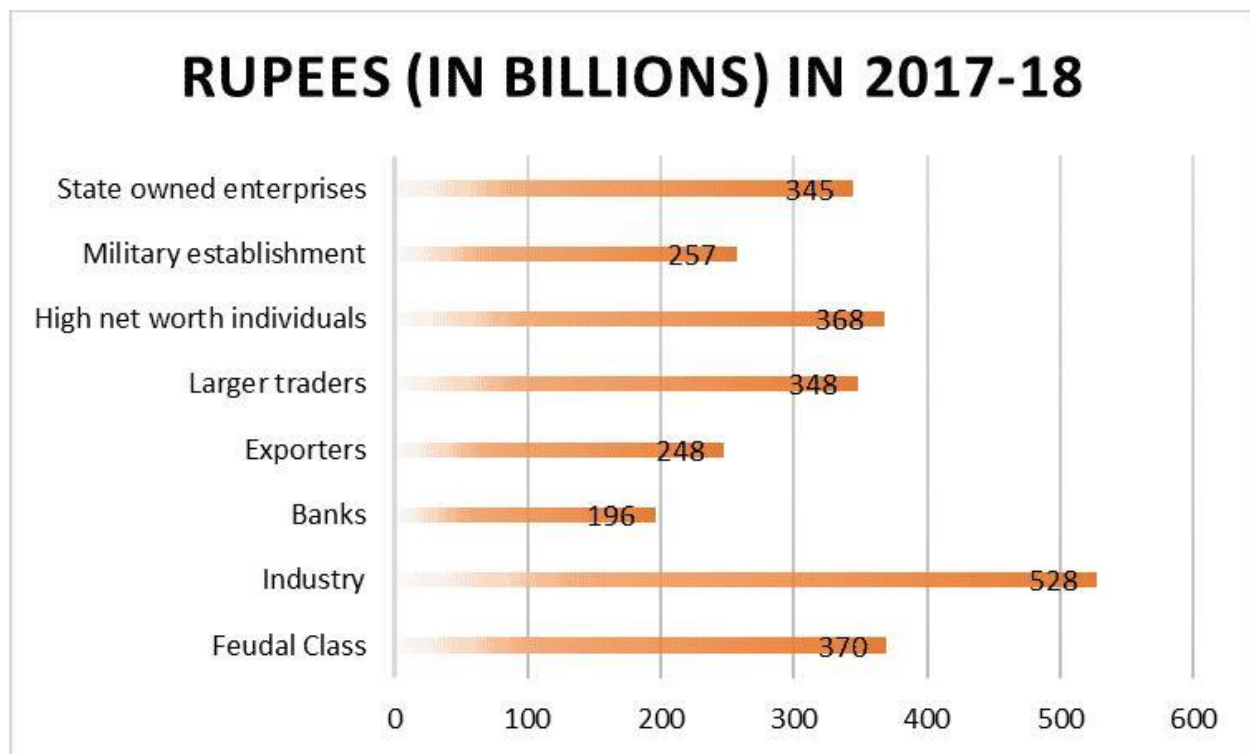
Military Dominance and Political Control

Military dominance manifests in several ways:

- Direct control through coups or authoritarian rule
- Indirect influence via intelligence networks and policy control
- Strategic alliances with political elites

This dominance reduces the authority of elected representatives and limits democratic decision-making.

Elite Capture and Power Concentration



Elite capture occurs when a small group of powerful individuals controls political and economic resources. These elites often collaborate with military institutions to:

- Maintain status quo
- Resist reforms that threaten their interests
- Influence policy decisions for personal gain

This alliance creates a closed power system, excluding public participation.

Impact on Governance

Dimension	Effect of Military–Elite Dominance
Rule of Law	Selective implementation of laws
Accountability	Weak oversight institutions
Policy Making	Centralized and non-transparent
Public Trust	Decline in confidence in government
Institutional Strength	Erosion of democratic structures

Governance becomes inefficient and often serves elite interests rather than public welfare.

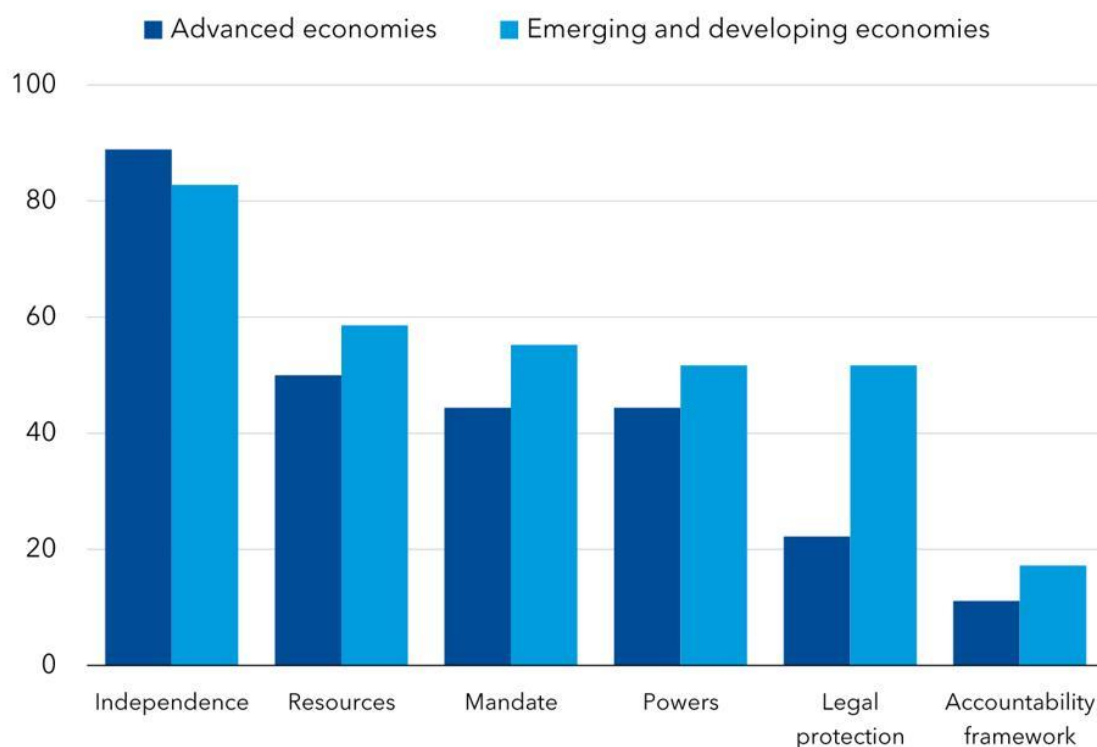
Barriers to Democratic Reforms

Assessing weaknesses

Many countries don't give supervisors the tools they need, and lack of independence is the most common deficiency.

Weaknesses in the institutional framework

(percent of countries assessed)



Sources: Basel Core Principles for Effective Banking Supervision detailed assessments of 45 countries from 2012 to June 2021; and IMF staff calculations.

IMF

Civil–military imbalance creates major obstacles to reform:

- Resistance to institutional accountability
- Suppression of political opposition
- Manipulation of electoral processes
- Control over media and information

As a result, reform initiatives remain superficial or fail entirely.

Figure: Cycle of Democratic Breakdown

Military Influence → Elite Alliance → Weak Institutions → Poor Governance
→ Public Discontent → Political Instability → Justification for Military Role

This cycle reinforces itself, making it difficult to restore democratic balance.

Future Prospects

Future research should focus on mechanisms for strengthening civilian oversight, including parliamentary control, judicial independence, and civil society engagement. The role of international organizations in promoting democratic norms and security sector reform also requires further exploration. Additionally, the impact of emerging technologies and information warfare on civil–military relations presents a new area for investigation.

Recommendations

Policy responses should prioritize constitutional reforms that clearly define civil–military boundaries. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing transparency, and promoting professional military education are essential. International cooperation should focus on capacity building and governance reforms, ensuring that military institutions operate within democratic frameworks.

Conclusion

Civil–military imbalance, combined with elite control, creates a structural barrier to democratic governance and reform. It weakens institutions, reduces accountability, and limits public participation. Sustainable democracy requires restoring civilian supremacy, strengthening institutions, and ensuring transparency and inclusivity in governance. Without addressing these structural issues, democratic systems remain fragile and vulnerable to repeated breakdowns.



Review Typology and Reporting

Review designs were classified into standard categories (scoping, umbrella, rapid, qualitative, and mixed-methods), with reporting aligned to established guidelines (PRISMA-ScR, PRIOR, PRISMA-RR, ENTREQ, and PRISMA/MMAT) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.

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