



ISSN Online: 3006-4708

ISSN Print: 3006-4694

SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES

<https://policyjournalofms.com>

The Role of Emotions in Political Decision-Making Process

Dil Awaiz

MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha, Email: awaizsg@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1741>

Abstract

This study examines the role of emotions in shaping political decision-making through a comparative analysis of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan, two influential leaders in Pakistan's political history. Drawing on theories from political psychology, affective intelligence, and emotional appraisal, the research analyzes how emotions influence leadership judgment, political communication, and mass mobilization. Employing a qualitative and comparative research design, the study relies on secondary data including political speeches, biographies, academic literature, and media sources. The findings demonstrate that both leaders strategically employed emotional narratives to legitimize authority, shape public attitudes, and influence political behavior.

Keywords: Emotions, Politics, Decisions-Making, Z. A. Bhutto, Imran Khan

Introduction

A comparative perspective is vital for reading the position of emotions in political decision-making because it allows the identity of patterns, distinctions, and management-precise emotional procedures throughout numerous contexts. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan constitute unique but pivotal levels in the political history of Pakistan, making them best topics for a comparative emotional look at.

Both leaders applied emotional appeals to cultivate public backing and consolidate political strength regardless of operating under wonderful historical, institutional, and media situations. Bhutto's management came about for the duration of the post-colonial Cold War generation, marked through mass mobilization and socialist discourse, even as Imran Khan's ascent happened in a globalized and digital political context pushed through ethical renewal rhetoric and mass-based nationalism.

A comparative analysis of those leaders lets in this study to research how analogous emotional mechanisms consisting of dignity, anger, hope, and ethical dedication are carried out otherwise throughout varying historic circumstances. This method strengthens analytical rigor by using revealing each consistency and evolution in Pakistan's emotional political landscape. Rather than judging leadership effectiveness, the comparative framework is adopted to realize how feelings serve as cognitive and strategic gadgets of political decision-making throughout temporal contexts.

Political decision-making has been studied through multiple theoretical lenses every offering unique hypothesis about how leaders investigate evidence and manage uncertainty. Classical Rational Choice Theory described decision-making as a technique guided with the aid of rational evaluation and final results optimization. However, analysts contend that rational frameworks undervalue mental complexity and forget about non-fabric drivers, specially the emotions that shape political judgments.

The Behavioral Revolution marked an essential transformation with the aid of emphasizing psychological restrictions and restrained cognitive processing capacities. Herbert Simon's "Bounded Rationality Theory" confirmed that leaders rarely adhere to most desirable decision-making; alternatively, they rely on cognitive

shortcuts and intuitive judgments below temporal stress. Later progress in political psychology broadened this via Prospect Theory, which posits that threat choices are based totally on whether results are framed as advantages or charges.

Contemporary studies, however, situates emotions as imperative to political choice-making. Affective Intelligence Theory demonstrates that emotions inclusive of tension, anger, and exuberance trigger different analytical mechanisms, motivating actors to rethink statistics or interact politically. Likewise, in keeping with Appraisal Theory, leaders understand political dynamics via emotionally inflected appraisals, which finally shape their selections and instrumental conversation.

Despite the growing reputation of emotions as a crucial element in political management, their role in strategic decision-making stays insufficiently theorized and empirically tested, specifically in growing democracies like Pakistan. Existing scholarship has largely prioritized rational-institutional factors, often marginalizing the affective and neuro-cognitive dimensions that form excessive-stakes political alternatives. This creates an enormous hole in know-how how feelings function not merely as tools for public persuasion, but as inner cognitive drivers that influence a leader's belief of threat, sovereignty, and national interest.

The study of emotions in political decision-making is highly significant, especially in the context of Pakistan where leadership frequently relies on emotional appeals to connect with the public. While traditional political science has generally emphasized rational choice and strategic calculation, the Pakistani experience demonstrates that emotions play an equally central role in shaping leadership styles, mobilizing public opinion, and determining political outcomes. By examining the cases of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan, two leaders who embody emotional politics in distinct ways this research provide deeper insights into how affect influences governance, policy-making, and public trust in political institutions.

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative design, relying primarily on secondary data to analyze the emotional dimensions of political decision-making in the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. The study integrates approaches from political psychology, discourse analysis, and leadership studies to explore how both leaders utilized emotional rhetoric, symbolic narratives, and populist strategies to shape public perception and mobilize mass support.

Every research project is conducted within a defined scope and is subject to certain limitations that restrict its coverage. This study focuses on the role of emotions in political decision-making, with specific reference to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. While the scope lies in examining leadership, governance, and public mobilization through an emotional lens, the limitations arise from the nature of secondary data and the interpretive essence of emotions. Defining these boundaries is essential for ensuring the clarity and academic validity of the research findings.

Role of Emotions

Although Bhutto and Khan operated in different eras, both emerged during moments of profound national crisis conditions that amplified the political salience of emotions. Bhutto's leadership unfolded in the aftermath of the 1971 territorial dismemberment, a period marked by collective trauma and class resentment. In contrast, Imran Khan rose amid post-9/11 insecurity, economic instability, and widespread disillusionment, particularly among the urban youth. These contrasting emotional climates did not merely form the background of leadership; they functioned as "affective infrastructures" that structured the kinds of emotions mobilized and the strategic decisions that followed.

Bhutto's emotional politics were grounded in ideological affect class-based resentment and revolutionary optimism transmitted through physical mobilization and symbolic acts. Imran Khan, by contrast, constructed a moralized emotional framework centered on corruption, authenticity, and national dignity, amplified through digital platforms that enabled real-time emotional feedback.

Both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan constructed their political authority through a shared emotional framework described as charismatic populism. Rather than relying primarily on institutional legitimacy, both

leaders anchored their power in direct emotional relationships with the masses. This strategy reflected not only individual leadership styles but also structural constraints within Pakistan's political system, where weak institutions and public distrust limited the effectiveness of procedural governance. In such a context, emotions became an alternative political infrastructure through which legitimacy and loyalty were produced. Through emotionally charged narratives, both leaders simplified complex political realities into morally intelligible conflicts. This simplification allowed followers to interpret politics through affect rather than policy detail, effectively bypassing rational-choice constraints.

From the perspective of affective intelligence, the mobilization of anger served to heighten public attentiveness, ensuring that followers remained emotionally invested in the leader's vision. Charisma, in this sense, did not merely accompany political authority; it actively structured political perception. By positioning themselves as the sole defenders of national honor, both leaders created a somatic marker for their followers associating their leadership with healing and their opponents with "national trauma".

However, while this emotional DNA enabled powerful mobilization, it also personalized authority. By weakening institutional mediation, both leaders found themselves in a position where their decision-making styles were increasingly dictated by the necessity of sustaining this emotional intensity. This dynamic laid the groundwork for both their political ascendance and the subsequent challenges of managing high public expectations.

A central feature of both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's and Imran Khan's leadership was the deliberate prioritization of emotional legitimacy over institutional endorsement. In contexts where formal political structures were weak, inefficient, or perceived as corrupt, both leaders cultivated direct affective relationships with their followers. This strategy enabled them to bypass intermediary political institutions, portraying themselves as authentic representatives of the people rather than participants in bureaucratic processes. In doing so, they not only legitimized their authority but also framed institutional resistance as morally suspect or disconnected from the national interest.

Bhutto's speeches and public addresses frequently emphasized institutional inadequacy, portraying parliament, bureaucrats, and elite actors as instruments of oppression or corruption. By delegitimizing institutional authority, Bhutto positioned himself as the only viable agent capable of acting upon the collective will. Similarly, Imran Khan employed digital platforms to construct a parallel political space in which institutional processes were depicted as captured by entrenched elites, often using terms such as "status quo" and "chor mafia" to delegitimize opposition actors. This approach allowed Khan to cultivate an image of personal integrity and moral authority that transcended formal political channels.

A defining feature of both Bhutto's and Imran Khan's leadership was their strategic use of anti-elite narratives, which functioned as emotionally potent tools for simplifying complex political realities and mobilizing public support. Rather than engaging followers with detailed policy arguments, both leaders transformed structural grievances into morally intelligible conflicts. This process effectively created an emotional binary: the virtuous people versus the corrupt or exploitative elite.

For Bhutto, the "22 families" became the emblematic target of systemic injustice, symbolizing entrenched economic power that oppressed ordinary citizens. This narrative reframed economic inequalities into an emotionally resonant moral struggle. By positioning himself as the champion of the oppressed, Bhutto converted collective resentment into political energy. Followers were invited to experience politics as a personal engagement in correcting historical wrongs, transforming social grievances into actionable commitment.

Imran Khan employed a similar emotional logic, though the axis of morality shifted from class-based exploitation to ethical corruption. Terms such as "status quo" and "chor mafia" were designed to signal moral failure, simplifying governance issues into a narrative of ethical decay. By framing opponents as morally illegitimate, Khan transformed frustration into a sense of duty, motivating activism and digital engagement. This aligns with Affective Intelligence Theory, which posits that emotions such as anger and moral outrage

increase attention and willingness to act. In the digital age, this was further amplified by algorithms that prioritize high-conflict engagement, creating affective publics rooted in shared indignation.

Analytically, these narratives illustrate the interplay between cognitive simplification and affective mobilization. By identifying a concrete antagonist, both leaders reduced governance challenges into emotionally digestible stories. Simultaneously, these narratives heightened followers' emotional arousal, creating a feedback loop where participation reinforced belief in the leader's moral authority. This mechanism demonstrates that emotional politics operates through structured affective dynamics that shape cognition and collective action.

Furthermore, these narratives had long-term institutional consequences. By framing elites as morally compromised, both leaders justified decisions that bypassed conventional channels, concentrating authority in the leader's office. The moral framing of opposition also created a durable partisan divide, linking commitment to loyalty rather than policy evaluation. Once an opponent is labeled as 'morally illegitimate,' any subsequent political negotiation is perceived by the emotionally charged base as a betrayal. This "volatility trap" illustrates how anti-elite narratives can constrain a leader's rational capacity to navigate complex realignments.

Anger and resentment were central components of Bhutto's and Imran Khan's affective political strategies, functioning not merely as incidental emotions but as deliberate instruments of mobilization. Both leaders capitalized on widespread dissatisfaction to convert latent grievances into active political engagement, transforming affect into tangible political power. This aligns with research in political psychology, which highlights that emotions such as anger and moral indignation can increase political participation, enhance attention to political messages, and reduce tolerance for compromise.

In Bhutto's case, post-1971 national humiliation, coupled with socio-economic disparities, created fertile ground for mobilizing collective anger. Bhutto strategically channeled this affect towards revolutionary optimism, framing his leadership as the corrective response to historical injustices and elite exploitation. Mass rallies and evocative speeches reinforced this affective climate, making anger a catalyst for both political loyalty and policy support. By linking emotion directly to collective action, Bhutto ensured that the intensity of public sentiment translated into sustained political engagement, even when institutional channels were weak or resistant.

Imran Khan, while operating in a different technological context, utilized similar mechanisms. Moral outrage against corruption and the perceived betrayal of public trust became the emotional backbone of his mobilization strategies. Social media platforms amplified these dynamics, enabling real-time feedback loops where expressions of anger were publicly visible and reinforced. Recent research indicates that this digital strategy effectively transformed individual frustration into a sense of collective moral purpose, framing participation as a necessary act of ethical correction.

Analytically, the deployment of anger and resentment functioned through several interrelated mechanisms. First, it simplified complex socio-political challenges into emotionally salient moral conflicts. Second, it created a feedback loop where collective affect reinforced leader credibility. Third, it legitimized extraordinary political action, allowing both leaders to pursue decisions with high rational costs but significant symbolic gains, such as Bhutto's nuclear policy or Khan's confrontational foreign policy stances. In each case, emotions constituted an alternative logic of political calculation where affective rewards were central to decision-making.

Importantly, these affective dynamics were not universally stabilizing. While anger enabled rapid mobilization, it also heightened political polarization and weakened institutional resilience. Bhutto's mobilization contributed to the intense political polarization preceding the 1977 crisis, while Khan's affective strategies amplified digital and societal divisions between 2018 and 2022. Crucially, the sustained mobilization of anger created an affective feedback loop that narrowed the leader's own cognitive space for compromise. When followers are primed for moral indignation, any shift toward pragmatic negotiation is

perceived as a betrayal, turning a mobilization tool into a strategic constraint.

Nationalist pride emerged as a foundational pillar in both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's and Imran Khan's leadership affective architectures, shaping how followers perceived political legitimacy and orienting decision-making processes. Beyond economic grievances or moral outrage, both leaders leveraged the collective emotional investment in Pakistan's dignity (izzat and ghairat) to construct a moral framework that justified extraordinary political action. Nationalist sentiment was strategically mobilized to consolidate authority and guide foreign policy choices.

For Bhutto, the trauma of the 1971 secession of East Pakistan created a profound emotional vacuum that required the reconstruction of national pride. Bhutto's rhetoric consistently framed Pakistan as a sovereign, resilient nation, emphasizing self-reliance and nuclear capability. His speeches symbolically reaffirmed Pakistan's dignity, portraying leadership decisions as efforts to restore the nation's honor. By emotionally tying political action to pride, Bhutto legitimized high-risk policies, including the pursuit of nuclear deterrence, as morally necessary rather than purely strategic choices.

Imran Khan similarly positioned national dignity as central to his leadership narrative, particularly in foreign relations. By framing international negotiations, UN statements, or regional disputes as tests of Pakistan's self-respect, Khan transformed policy choices into emotionally salient moral acts. Digital platforms amplified this effect by providing immediate feedback loops where followers could collectively reaffirm nationalistic sentiment, reinforcing a sense of moral duty tied to the leader's agenda. Unlike Bhutto, Khan's emphasis was less on post-war sovereignty and more on restoring ethical and reputational standing through "civilizational populism". This framing of sovereignty in absolute emotional terms meant that foreign policy decisions were no longer judged on material outcomes but on affective resonance. For Bhutto, the nuclear pursuit became a somatic marker of survival; for Khan, the "Absolutely Not" stance became a marker of moral independence. Analytically, nationalist pride functioned in three ways. First, it created affective alignment between leader and followers, fostering loyalty that transcended institutional structures. Second, it justified extraordinary political decisions by framing them as responses to threats to national identity. Third, it served as a lens for interpreting external challenges, enabling both leaders to construct narratives in which foreign policy became a stage for moral performance. In essence, nationalist pride was a constitutive element of decision-making logic.

Importantly, the mobilization of nationalist pride illustrates the interplay between emotion and symbolic politics. Both leaders transformed abstract concepts sovereignty, honor, and dignity into emotionally resonant political tools. This approach reinforced charismatic authority and demonstrates that emotional leadership operates through collective symbolic engagement.

Charismatic authority is grounded in followers' emotional belief in a leader's exceptional qualities rather than in formal institutional legitimacy. In the cases of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan, this form of authority was deliberately cultivated through both rhetorical and performative strategies, resulting in highly personalized political loyalty that often superseded allegiance to institutions or policies.

Bhutto's charismatic authority emerged from his ability to embody both the aspirations and frustrations of post-1971 Pakistan. Through mass rallies, evocative speeches, and symbolic acts, he transformed collective grievances into a personal connection with the electorate. His emotional framing linking social justice, national pride, and anti-elite narratives created a direct affective bond with followers, who increasingly perceived political outcomes as contingent on his leadership rather than on institutional processes. In this sense, charisma served as a mechanism for both mobilization and authority consolidation, enabling Bhutto to pursue policies with substantial political and economic risks while maintaining legitimacy.

Imran Khan's charisma operated in a parallel but technologically mediated manner. Digital platforms enabled the construction of a personal brand, where his image, rhetoric, and symbolic gestures circulated instantly. By engaging directly with followers through social media, Khan bypassed traditional political hierarchies, reinforcing loyalty through immediate affective feedback. The "Naya Pakistan" narrative and moralistic anti-

corruption framing intensified this personalization, producing a sense of shared mission and ethical commitment among supporters. Charisma thus became both relational and performative, structured through online networks as well as in-person events. However, this digitally persistent charisma also imposes a "performance trap" on the leader. Unlike the cyclical nature of traditional rallies, the digital feed demands constant affective stimulation, forcing the leader into a state of perpetual confrontation to sustain follower engagement and loyalty.

Analytically, the personalization of loyalty has three notable implications. First, it enhanced mobilization capacity, as commitment was tied less to party ideology and more to the leader's persona. Second, it concentrated decision-making authority around the leader, allowing for rapid response but also increasing vulnerability to emotional overload. Third, it created a durable affective bond that could outlast specific policy failures, providing resilience during periods of institutional opposition.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's leadership was deeply anchored in ideological affect a form of political mobilization that links followers' emotions to collective social and nationalistic ideologies. Ideological affect operates by creating morally intelligible binaries, framing political issues as struggles between justice and oppression, or sovereignty and subjugation. For Bhutto, post-1971 Pakistan presented both emotional trauma and structural grievances: the secession of East Pakistan, coupled with entrenched socio-economic disparities, created fertile ground for emotionally charged political narratives.

Bhutto systematically channeled public anger into ideological frameworks, most notably through his anti-elite rhetoric targeting the "22 families" and other entrenched economic powers. By doing so, he transformed diffuse resentment into collective political energy that could be directed toward institutional and policy objectives. The framing of political action as a moral and ideological imperative strengthened both his legitimacy and followers' emotional investment, effectively integrating affective loyalty with political ideology.

Mass rallies, public addresses, and symbolic acts such as Bhutto's focus on nuclear sovereignty served as platforms for synchronizing the emotional energy of the populace with broader ideological aims. These events did more than communicate policy; they actively cultivated emotional alignment, transforming abstract grievances into shared moral and political commitments. The strategic use of ideological affect allowed Bhutto to justify high-risk decisions, as followers perceived such actions as necessary to restore social justice and national honor. Ideological affect thus provided a stabilizing anchor for decision-making; by linking emotional energy to a structured political program, Bhutto was able to justify difficult state-building choices as necessary steps toward an ideological utopia.

Analytically, ideological affect in Bhutto's leadership demonstrates the interplay between emotion and rationality. While decisions may appear instrumental and policy-driven, they are often legitimized through affective resonance with collective ideals. This form of mobilization underscores the convergence of emotion, ideology, and charismatic authority, highlighting how affect functions as a structural resource for decision-making and political control. Importantly, while highly effective in rallying support, ideological affect also intensified polarization and constrained institutional negotiation, as followers' emotional commitment elevated loyalty to ideals and to the leader above procedural compromise.

Imran Khan's leadership exemplifies the mobilization of moral affect, a form of emotional engagement centered on ethics, personal integrity, and accountability, rather than structural or class-based grievances. Moral affect operates by framing political participation as a moral duty, emphasizing the ethical character of leaders and followers' responsibility to correct perceived injustices. Unlike Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, whose affective appeals were rooted in ideological narratives, Khan's emotional strategy prioritized individual morality and anti-corruption sentiment often conceptualized through his vision of an Islamic welfare state based on the principles of *Riyasat-e-Madina* as the primary vectors of mobilization.

Khan's rhetoric strategically targeted the political establishment, portraying them as morally compromised through unethical behavior, famously using terms like "status quo" and "chor mafia". Followers were

encouraged to perceive political engagement through protests and civic activism as a collective moral responsibility. By linking political action to ethical imperatives, Khan effectively transformed moral indignation into sustained participation, producing an emotionally engaged and highly responsive support base.

The digital environment amplified this moral affect by creating a virtual public sphere where ethical narratives and public moral consensus were reinforced in real-time. This created an affective feedback loop in which expressions of outrage and hope were collectively validated, significantly influencing voting patterns and public perceptions of democracy. Crucially, this moral affect narrows the cognitive space for pragmatic decision-making; any form of political negotiation is framed not as strategic necessity but as an ethical compromise. Consequently, Khan's decision-making was often performative, aimed at sustaining his moral 'brand' even when rational-choice costs were high. The immediacy of online engagement differentiates moral affect in Khan's era from the mass-mediated ideological effect of Bhutto, demonstrating how technology shapes the mechanics of emotional politics.

Analytically, moral affect influenced Khan's logic by prioritizing actions with high symbolic or ethical payoff such as his anti-corruption drives over strictly institutional considerations. These initiatives were framed as morally necessary, providing affective justification for choices involving strategic risk. Moreover, moral affect strengthened personalized loyalty, as followers' commitment became closely tied to perceptions of Khan's ethical credibility rather than adherence to traditional party ideology.

The comparative analysis of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ideological affect and Imran Khan's moral affect reveals both continuity and divergence in the emotional mechanics of Pakistani political leadership.

Whereas Bhutto's affective appeals activated group-level ideological loyalty, Khan's rhetoric fostered personalized moral commitment. In neurobiological terms, Bhutto's somatic markers were tied to territorial survival and class dignity, while Khan's are rooted in personal authenticity and ethical purification. This reflects a broader shift in populist mobilization from structural grievances to "civilizational" and moral identity.

The technological medium thus directly shaped the mechanics of affective politics. Bhutto utilized mass rallies and state-controlled analog media to synchronize the emotional energy of the populace. In contrast, Khan's digital affective architecture utilizes social media to create real-time, decentralized emotional mobilization. Crucially, the digital era has introduced a 'temporal acceleration' of affect; Khan's decision-making is often subject to real-time emotional pressure from digital feedback loops, whereas the analog era allowed Bhutto a degree of 'affective distance' to calibrate his strategic responses.

In both cases, emotional resonance allowed the leaders to subordinate conventional rationality to affective rewards. However, this reliance on high-arousal emotions also creates a 'strategic trap.' For Bhutto, ideological purity made institutional compromise difficult, contributing to the 1977 political crisis. For Khan, moral absolutism narrows the cognitive space for pragmatic political realignment, as any shift is perceived as a moral betrayal by the base. These findings demonstrate the importance of examining both emotional content and communicative modality to understand leadership effectiveness in Pakistan's political context.

Limits and Risks

Emotional over-mobilization occurs when political leadership excessively relies on affective appeals to sustain legitimacy, generating emotional intensity that surpasses institutional capacity for regulation. In both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's and Imran Khan's leadership trajectories, emotional mobilization functioned as a powerful resource; however, its overextension produced destabilizing consequences.

In contrast, Imran Khan's emotional over-mobilization unfolded within a digital ecosystem. The speed and scale of digital affect reduced opportunities for institutional mediation. Unlike Bhutto's episodic mass mobilization, Khan's digital architecture created a state of "permanent indignation," where the constant feed of moral outrage left little cognitive space for followers to engage in de-escalation.

From an analytical perspective, emotional over-mobilization results in "rhetorical entrapment." As the leader continuously raises the emotional stakes to maintain loyalty, they lose the strategic flexibility to engage in pragmatic compromise. In Bhutto's case, his revolutionary rhetoric made the 1977 negotiations appear as surrender to his base. Similarly, Khan's moral absolutism on digital platforms narrowed his path for institutional reconciliation during the 2022 political crisis. Affective Intelligence Theory suggests that excessive reliance on high-arousal emotions diminishes reflective political judgment. Thus, in both eras, unchecked escalation transformed affect from a strategic asset into a structural liability that ultimately constrained the leader's own decision-making autonomy.

Affective political leadership, when grounded in high-intensity emotions such as anger, resentment, and moral outrage, tends to generate deep political polarization that places sustained pressure on democratic institutions. In the cases of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan, emotional mobilization not only shaped public allegiance but also reconfigured the relationship between leadership and institutional authority.

Bhutto's populist leadership intensified ideological polarization by framing political contestation through a people-versus-elite dichotomy. His anti-elite discourse delegitimized political opposition and narrowed the space for institutional compromise. As emotional loyalty to the leader increased, institutions such as the judiciary and the military were increasingly perceived through an affective lens rather than as neutral governance actors, contributing to the political deadlock of the mid-1970s.

In Imran Khan's leadership, polarization operated through moral and digital mechanisms. Political disagreement was frequently framed as ethical failure or "corruption," producing a moralized landscape where dissenting actors were cast as enemies of the national interest. Social media platforms intensified this by creating affective echo chambers that reinforced in-group loyalty while amplifying out-group hostility. The digital circulation of emotionally charged narratives reduced the capacity of institutions to act as mediators, particularly during the 2022 regime-change episode.

From a theoretical standpoint, Affective Intelligence Theory explains how persistent exposure to high-arousal emotions reduces tolerance for ambiguity and increases preference for group alignment. In both cases, polarization translated into institutional strain, as governance increasingly depended on emotional legitimacy rather than procedural consensus. This dynamic demonstrates that while emotional mobilization enhances political clarity, it simultaneously undermines institutional pluralism and democratic resilience.

While emotional mobilization can generate rapid political support, its long-term sustainability remains structurally fragile. Emotion-driven leadership depends on the continuous reproduction of affect, requiring leaders to repeatedly stimulate public sentiment to maintain authority. In the cases of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan, this created significant governance challenges as emotional intensity proved difficult to stabilize. Bhutto's leadership relied on mass rallies and ideological rhetoric to sustain popular enthusiasm. Over time, the repeated invocation of revolutionary affect narrowed the space for policy pragmatism. As emotional expectations increased, the leadership's capacity to deliver tangible outcomes diminished, exposing the limits of affect-centered governance. This imbalance weakened the sustainability of Bhutto's authority and contributed to the political volatility of the late 1970s.

Imran Khan's leadership faced similar sustainability challenges within a digital context. His reliance on social media-driven affects particularly moral outrage and anti-corruption discourse required continuous narrative production. Digital platforms intensified this pressure through real-time feedback, making legitimacy contingent upon maintaining emotional alignment with online supporters. This created "affective exhaustion," where constant mobilization strained both governance capacity and political coherence.

From a theoretical perspective, Emotional Intelligence frameworks suggest that effective leadership requires the regulation, not merely the expression, of emotion. In both cases, the absence of affective moderation transformed mobilization into a permanent state of political urgency, reducing adaptability and heightening public frustration.

In both Bhutto's and Khan's models, emotional mobilization reconfigured democratic norms by shifting

authority away from institutions toward personalized, affective legitimacy. This altered how accountability and opposition were practiced.

Bhutto's charismatic populism expanded participation among marginalized groups but was accompanied by a personalization of authority where loyalty to the leader substituted for institutional accountability. Democratic opposition was often framed as resistance to the "popular will," weakening institutional checks. As Weber (1978) argues, charismatic authority often conflicts with the legal-rational governance necessary for stable democracy.

Imran Khan's leadership produced similar tensions. His emphasis on moral authenticity elevated emotional legitimacy above procedural norms. Political dissent was frequently framed as an ethical failure, positioning critics as "anti-reform" rather than legitimate actors. The digital amplification of these narratives blurred the line between democratic participation and emotional conformity, narrowing the deliberative space.

From a political psychology perspective, affective mobilization risks undermining democratic tolerance by privileging emotional certainty over deliberation. In both cases, democracy functioned as a continuous emotional referendum on leadership authenticity rather than a system of negotiated processes. Furthermore, the personalization of authority eroded internal party democracy, as institutional debate was replaced by affective conformity to the leader's charismatic will. In this environment, dissent was viewed not as a democratic right but as an emotional betrayal of the shared moral or ideological cause.

Conclusion

The article has provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan's leadership, demonstrating that while their historical and technological contexts differed, the affective architecture of their political authority followed a remarkably consistent logic. The primary finding of this article is that in Pakistan's political landscape, emotions are not merely peripheral tools for mobilization; they are constitutive elements of decision-making that can override rational-institutional calculations.

The comparative evidence reveals that both leaders utilized a shared Affective DNA built on charismatic populism, anti-elite narratives, and nationalist pride. Bhutto's leadership, grounded in the analog era, utilized ideological affect class-based resentment and post-1971 trauma to mobilize a physically bounded populace. In contrast, Imran Khan, operating in the digital era, harnessed moral affect ethical indignation and anti-corruption sentiment through networked algorithms that enabled real-time emotional feedback. This shift from "Ideological" to "Moral" affect illustrates how political leadership adapts to technological changes while remaining anchored in high-arousal emotional triggers.

A critical insight from this comparison is the trade-off between emotional reward and rational cost. Both Bhutto and Khan strategically chose defiance over diplomacy (e.g., the Nuclear Program and the "Absolutely Not" stance) because the symbolic capital of national dignity provided greater legitimacy than technocratic efficiency. However, the analysis also underscores the significant risks of this approach. The reliance on permanent emotional mobilization led to "rhetorical entrapment" and affective overload, eventually creating deep-seated polarization that strained the democratic and institutional fabric of the state. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that the transition from Bhutto's "Stage" to Khan's "Digital Feed" has accelerated the speed and intensity of emotional politics, making leadership both more potent and more volatile. By bypassing institutional mediation in favor of direct affective bonds, both leaders transformed political authority into a continuous emotional referendum. These findings provide the essential synthesis required to conclude this article, establishing that the role of emotions is the enduring, yet evolving, engine of political decision-making in Pakistan.

References

- Ahmed, F. (2013). *Pakistan: The Politics of Religious Emotions*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Routledge.

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Bleiker, R., & Hutchison, E. (2008). *Fear on more: Emotions and world politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brader, T. (2006). *Campaigning for hearts and minds: How emotional appeals in political ads work*. University of Chicago Press.
- Elster, J. (1999). *Alchemies of the mind: Rationality and the emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fair, C. C. (2018). *In its own words: Understanding the rhetoric of Pakistan's leadership*. Georgetown University Press.
- Hasan, M. (2000). *The Mirage of Power: An Inquiry into the Bhutto Years 1971–1977*. Oxford University Press.
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News that matters: Television and American opinion*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jaffrelot, C. (2015). *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. Oxford University Press.
- Jalal, A. (1990). *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, M. A. (2005). *We've Learnt Nothing from History: Pakistan: Politics and Military Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Khan, S. (2005). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2013). *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Redlawsk, D. P., & Habegger, M. W. (2020). *A Citizen's Guide to the Political Psychology of Voting*. Routledge.
- Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Waseem, M. (2022). *Political conflict in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Ziring, L. (1980). *Pakistan: The enigma of political development*. Dawson.