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**Affective Populism and Democratic Contestation in Pakistan: A Comparative Study of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan**

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**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1834>**

**Abstract**

This study examines the role of affective populism in shaping democratic contestation in Pakistan through a comparative analysis of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. It argues that populism in Pakistan is deeply rooted in emotional appeal rather than purely ideological positioning. Both leaders mobilized public support by invoking feelings of grievance, hope, pride, and anger against perceived elites. Bhutto's populism emerged in a post-colonial and post-war context, where economic inequality and political exclusion created strong emotional currents among the masses. In contrast, Imran Khan's populism developed in a media-driven and urbanized political environment, where narratives of corruption and moral decline played a central role. The study finds that affective populism has a dual impact on democracy in Pakistan. On one hand, it increases political participation and challenges entrenched elites. On the other hand, it weakens institutional trust and promotes polarization. By comparing two distinct political eras, this paper highlights how emotional narratives continue to shape democratic practices in Pakistan. The study contributes to the broader literature on populism by showing how affective politics operates in a developing democratic context.

**Keywords:** Affective Populism; Pakistan Politics; Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto; Imran Khan; Democratic Contestation; Political Emotions; Populist Leadership

**Introduction**

Populism has become a defining feature of contemporary politics across the world. It is often described as a struggle between "the people" and "the elite." However, this definition does not fully explain why populist movements gain strong public support. Emotions play a central role in this process. Political leaders do not only present policies. They also create feelings. These feelings shape how people understand politics. In Pakistan, populism has a long history. It is not a new phenomenon. From the 1970s to the present, political leaders have used emotional narratives to mobilize the public. Among them, two figures stand out: Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. Both leaders challenged existing power structures. Both claimed to represent the true will of the people. Most importantly, both relied heavily on emotional appeal.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto emerged in a period of political crisis. The disintegration of Pakistan in 1971 created deep national trauma. Economic inequality and political exclusion were widespread. Bhutto used this context to build a powerful populist movement. His slogan "Roti, Kapra, aur Makan" was simple but

emotionally strong. It connected directly with the everyday struggles of ordinary citizens. Bhutto presented himself as the voice of the oppressed.

Imran Khan's rise took place in a very different context. Pakistan had experienced decades of political instability, corruption scandals, and weak governance. The expansion of media and social media transformed political communication. Khan used these platforms effectively. His message focused on accountability, justice, and moral reform. He framed politics as a battle between honest citizens and corrupt elites. This narrative generated strong emotional responses, especially among the urban middle class and youth.

Despite differences in context, both leaders used similar strategies. They created a moral divide between "us" and "them." They appealed to feelings of anger, hope, and national pride. This type of politics can be understood as affective populism. It refers to the use of emotions as a central tool in populist mobilization. This paper argues that affective populism plays a key role in shaping democratic contestation in Pakistan. It expands political participation but also deepens polarization. By comparing Bhutto and Khan, this study shows how emotional politics operates across different historical periods. It also highlights the strengths and risks of populism in a developing democracy.

The study is based on qualitative analysis of speeches, political narratives, and existing academic literature. It adopts a comparative approach to identify similarities and differences between the two leaders. The goal is not only to describe populism in Pakistan but also to explain its impact on democratic processes.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Populism is often defined as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). This definition highlights the moral dimension of populism. However, it does not fully explain why people become deeply attached to populist leaders. For this, the role of emotions must be considered.

Affective populism refers to the use of emotions as a central element in political mobilization. It focuses on how leaders create and channel feelings such as anger, fear, hope, and pride. These emotions help build a strong connection between leaders and their followers (Moffitt, 2016). In this sense, populism is not only about ideas. It is also about emotional performance.

Emotions simplify complex political realities. They turn abstract issues into personal experiences. For example, corruption is not presented as a technical problem. It is framed as a moral injustice that affects ordinary people. This creates anger and resentment. Similarly, promises of reform generate hope and expectation. These emotional responses strengthen political loyalty.

Affective populism also relies on narrative construction. Leaders create stories that define who belongs to the nation and who does not. These stories often include heroes and villains. The leader is presented as the voice of the people. The elite is portrayed as selfish and disconnected. This emotional framing makes political messages more powerful and easier to understand (Kazin, 1995).

Another important aspect is performance. Populist leaders use speeches, symbols, and media to display emotions. They show anger against injustice. They express empathy with the suffering of the people. These performances are not random. They are carefully crafted to build trust and identification (Moffitt, 2016).

In the context of developing countries, affective populism becomes even more significant. Weak institutions and economic inequality create strong emotional conditions. People feel excluded from political and economic systems. Populist leaders use these feelings to mobilize support. They promise change and recognition. However, affective populism has both positive and negative effects. On one hand, it increases political participation. People feel that their voices matter. On the other hand, it can weaken democratic institutions. Emotional politics often reduces space for rational debate. It creates polarization

and distrust (Urbinati, 2019).

This study uses affective populism as a framework to analyze the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. It examines how both leaders used emotions to build political movements. It also explores how these emotional strategies shaped democratic contestation in Pakistan.

### **Historical Context of Populism in Pakistan**

Populism in Pakistan has evolved over time. It is closely linked with the country's political and economic conditions. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has experienced periods of military rule, weak democratic institutions, and social inequality. These conditions have created space for populist politics. The first major wave of populism emerged in the late 1960s. This period was marked by public dissatisfaction with the regime of Ayub Khan. Economic growth had increased inequality. Political power was concentrated among small elite. This created resentment among workers, students, and the middle class (Talbot, 2012).

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto capitalized on this situation. He founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1967. His message was simple and powerful. He promised social justice and economic equality. His slogan "Roti, Kapra, aur Makan" became a symbol of hope for the poor. Bhutto's populism was rooted in class-based politics. He appealed to workers and peasants. He also used strong emotional language against the elite (Jalal, 1995).

The 1970 elections marked a turning point. Bhutto gained massive support in West Pakistan. His success showed the power of populist mobilization. However, his rule also revealed the limits of populism. While he introduced reforms, he also centralized power. This created tension between democratic ideals and political practice. After Bhutto, populism did not disappear. It took new forms. During the 1980s and 1990s, leaders like Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif used populist rhetoric. However, their politics was less ideologically driven. It was more focused on patronage and electoral competition (Talbot, 2012).

A new phase of populism emerged in the 2010s with the rise of Imran Khan. This period was shaped by globalization, media expansion, and urbanization. Corruption became a central political issue. Public trust in traditional parties declined. Khan used this environment to build his political movement.

Unlike Bhutto, Khan's populism was not primarily class-based. It was moral and institutional. He focused on accountability and justice. He presented himself as an outsider who would reform the system. Social media played a key role in spreading his message. It allowed direct communication with supporters, especially the youth (Shafiqat, 2019).

This historical overview shows that populism in Pakistan is not static. It adapts to changing conditions. However, one element remains constant: the use of emotional appeal. From Bhutto to Khan, affective populism has been a powerful force in shaping political behavior.

### **Case Study 1: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Affective Populism**

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto remains one of the most important populist leaders in Pakistan's history. His political rise was closely linked with a period of crisis and transformation. The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by political unrest, economic inequality, and national disillusionment after the separation of East Pakistan. These conditions created a strong emotional environment that Bhutto used effectively.

Bhutto's populism was deeply affective. He did not rely only on policy proposals. He spoke in a language that ordinary people could understand. His slogan "Roti, Kapra, aur Makan" was not just a policy agenda. It was an emotional promise. It addressed basic needs and gave people a sense of dignity. This simple phrase created a powerful emotional connection between Bhutto and the masses (Jalal, 1995).

Bhutto also used anger as a political tool. He openly criticized the ruling elite. He accused them of exploiting the people and ignoring their needs. This created a clear division between "the people" and "the elite." His speeches often included strong and direct language. This made his message more relatable and

impactful. People felt that he was expressing their frustrations (Talbot, 2012).

Another key element of Bhutto's affective populism was his personal style. He was a charismatic speaker. He used body language, tone, and timing to engage his audience. His rallies were emotionally charged events. Supporters did not just listen to him. They felt connected to him. This emotional bond strengthened his political support.

Bhutto also appealed to national pride. After the trauma of 1971, many Pakistanis felt a loss of identity and confidence. Bhutto tried to restore this sense of pride. He presented himself as a leader who would rebuild the nation. His foreign policy decisions, such as pursuing nuclear capability, were framed in terms of national dignity. This created a sense of collective purpose (Jalal, 1995).

However, Bhutto's affective populism had limitations. While he mobilized people in the name of democracy, his governance style became increasingly centralized. He suppressed political opposition and weakened institutions. This shows a key tension in populist politics. Emotional mobilization can support democratic participation, but it can also lead to authoritarian tendencies (Urbinati, 2019).

Bhutto's legacy demonstrates that affective populism can be both empowering and problematic. It gives voice to marginalized groups, but it also risks concentrating power in the hands of a single leader.

## **Case Study 2: Imran Khan and Contemporary Affective Populism**

Imran Khan represents a modern form of affective populism in Pakistan. His political rise took place in a very different context compared to Bhutto. By the 2010s, Pakistan had a more urbanized society, a growing middle class, and widespread access to media and social media. These changes shaped the nature of his populist appeal.

Khan's populism is centered on morality and accountability. His main narrative focuses on corruption. He presents corruption as the root cause of all major problems in Pakistan. This framing turns a complex issue into a clear moral struggle. It creates anger against political elites and hope for reform (Shafqat, 2019).

Like Bhutto, Khan constructs a division between "the people" and "the elite." However, the nature of this division is different. Bhutto's populism was more class-based. Khan's populism is more moral and institutional. He portrays himself as an honest leader fighting against a corrupt system. This image resonates strongly with the urban middle class and youth.

A key feature of Khan's affective populism is his use of media. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow direct communication with supporters. This reduces the role of traditional intermediaries. Khan uses these platforms to share messages, respond to criticism, and mobilize support. His communication style is simple and direct. It often includes emotional language that appeals to frustration and hope.

Khan also uses religious and national identity in his narratives. He often refers to the idea of an Islamic welfare state. This creates a moral vision of governance. It connects political goals with religious values. This combination of religion and politics strengthens emotional attachment among supporters (Rizvi, 2020).

Public gatherings and speeches remain important in Khan's politics. His rallies are highly energetic. They include slogans, music, and strong emotional messaging. These events create a sense of unity and purpose. Supporters feel that they are part of a larger movement.

However, like Bhutto, Khan's populism also has contradictions. While he emphasizes accountability and rule of law, his government has been criticized for political polarization and pressure on opposition parties. His narrative often leaves little space for compromise. Opponents are not just political rivals. They are portrayed as morally corrupt. This deepens divisions within society (Shafqat, 2019).

Khan's case shows how affective populism has adapted to new political realities. Technology, media, and changing social structures have transformed the way emotions are used in politics.

However, the core strategy remains the same: building a strong emotional connection with the public.

## **Comparative Analysis: Bhutto and Imran Khan**

A comparison of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan shows both similarities and differences in their use of affective populism. Both leaders relied heavily on emotional appeal. Both constructed a divide between the people and the elite. However, the context and style of their populism were different.

One major similarity is their use of simple and powerful language. Bhutto's slogan "Roti, Kapra, aur Makan" and Khan's narrative of accountability both reduced complex issues into clear emotional messages. These messages were easy to understand. They created strong emotional responses among the public. This simplicity is a key feature of affective populism (Mudde, 2004).

Another similarity is their emphasis on moral legitimacy. Both leaders presented themselves as the true representatives of the people. They claimed that existing elites were corrupt and disconnected. This moral framing strengthened their political position. It made opposition appear illegitimate (Kazin, 1995).

However, there are also important differences. Bhutto's populism was rooted in class politics. He focused on economic inequality and social justice. His support base included workers, peasants, and the lower classes. In contrast, Khan's populism is more focused on governance and morality. His main issue is corruption. His support base includes the urban middle class and youth.

The role of media also creates a major difference. Bhutto relied on traditional forms of communication such as public rallies and speeches. His connection with the public was direct but limited by technology. Khan, on the other hand, operates in a digital environment. Social media allows him to reach a larger audience instantly. It also enables continuous engagement with supporters (Moffitt, 2016).

Another difference lies in the political context. Bhutto operated in a period of post-colonial state-building. The political system was still developing. In contrast, Khan operates in a more established but fragile democratic system. His populism interacts with existing institutions in different ways.

Despite these differences, both cases show that emotions are central to political mobilization in Pakistan. Affective populism is not limited to a specific period. It adapts to changing conditions but remains a powerful force.

## **Affective Populism and Democratic Contestation in Pakistan**

Affective populism has a complex relationship with democracy in Pakistan. It both strengthens and challenges democratic processes. Its impact can be understood in two main ways.

On the positive side, affective populism increases political participation. It brings new groups into the political process. People who feel ignored by traditional elites become politically active. Emotional appeal makes politics more accessible. It creates a sense of belonging and purpose. This can strengthen democratic engagement.

For example, both Bhutto and Khan mobilized large segments of the population. They encouraged people to vote, attend rallies, and participate in political debates. This level of engagement is important for a functioning democracy.

However, the negative effects are equally significant. Affective populism often leads to polarization. It divides society into opposing camps. The language of "us" versus "them" reduces space for dialogue. Political opponents are seen as enemies rather than competitors. This weakens democratic norms (Urbinati, 2019).

Another issue is the weakening of institutions. Populist leaders often claim to represent the direct will of the people. This can reduce the importance of institutions such as parliament, judiciary, and political parties. Decision-making becomes more centralized. This creates risks for democratic stability.

In Pakistan, where institutions are already fragile, this effect is particularly strong. Both Bhutto and Khan faced criticism for undermining institutional balance. Their reliance on personal leadership created challenges for long-term democratic development.

Affective populism also affects political discourse. Emotional narratives often replace rational debate. Complex policy issues are simplified into moral conflicts. This limits the quality of public discussion. It makes

it harder to find practical solutions to problems.

At the same time, affective populism cannot be ignored or dismissed. It reflects real grievances and frustrations. Economic inequality, corruption, and political exclusion are serious issues. Populist leaders give voice to these concerns. The challenge is to address these issues without undermining democratic institutions.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the role of affective populism in shaping democratic contestation in Pakistan through a comparative analysis of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. It has argued that populism in Pakistan is deeply emotional. Leaders do not only present ideas. They create feelings that shape political behavior.

Both Bhutto and Khan used emotions such as anger, hope, and pride to mobilize support. They constructed a moral divide between the people and the elite. This strategy helped them gain popularity and challenge existing power structures. However, it also created tensions within the democratic system.

The comparison shows that affective populism is not limited to a specific historical period. It adapts to different contexts. Bhutto's populism was shaped by class politics and post-colonial challenges. Khan's populism reflects a media-driven and urbanized society. Despite these differences, the central role of emotions remains constant.

The study also highlights the dual impact of affective populism. It increases political participation and gives voice to marginalized groups. At the same time, it weakens institutions, promotes polarization, and limits rational debate. This creates a complex relationship between populism and democracy.

For Pakistan, the key challenge is to balance emotional mobilization with institutional stability. Populism cannot be eliminated, nor should it be ignored. Instead, democratic systems must adapt to manage its effects. Strong institutions, inclusive governance, and informed public debate are essential.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of populism by showing how affective politics operates in a developing democratic context. It also opens space for further research on the relationship between emotions and political behavior in Pakistan.

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