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## POPULIST POLITICS IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN THREEK -E- INSAF (PTI) FROM 2018-2023

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### Abstract

Populism, although not a new political ideology, has witnessed a significant resurgence since the late 20th century. Emerging initially among Southern sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the United States during the 1880s, populism has since manifested globally, characterized by its opposition to elites and its appeal to the "common people." This thesis explores the nature of populism, its ideological foundations, and its impact on contemporary politics, with a particular focus on Pakistan's political landscape. The study critically examines the populist strategies of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its leader Imran Khan, assessing their socio-political and economic consequences from 2018 to 2023. By distinguishing between populist and non-populist politics in Pakistan, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of PTI's rise and its implications for democracy and governance in the region. The analysis reveals the intricate dynamics between populist rhetoric and policy, and their effects on the economic and sociopolitical fabric of Pakistan. Key findings indicate that PTI's populist approach has significantly reshaped political discourse and governance structures, promoting a narrative that pits the "pure people" against the "corrupt elite." The thesis also highlights the broader implications of populism for democratic practices, suggesting that while populism can invigorate political engagement and address genuine grievances, it also poses challenges to pluralism and institutional stability. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of populism in the Pakistani context, offering valuable insights into its potential trajectories and the critical balance required to sustain democratic values amidst rising populist sentiments.

### Introduction

Populism arose during the 1880s, with its most grounded voting demographic in the South. The Southern Farmers' Alliance (comprised of white allies) had an enrollment of north of 2 million of every 11 distinct states. The Colored Farmers Alliance (with dark skin individuals) had an enrollment in millions. The main truth is that the two gatherings comprised predominantly of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In the fallout of bondage, ranch proprietors took to recruiting workers to cultivate their property. Sharecroppers were paid a share of the money they made from the crops they grew. The landlords let the land to tenant farmers. In the two cases, the essential issue was that estate proprietors chose toward the end how much tenant farmers and sharecroppers got in the method of pay. In many occurrences, tenant farmers and sharecroppers

didn't have reserve funds or money to purchase hardware or supplies. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers always ended up in the red and owed money to their landlords when the crops were harvested because those were supplied by the landlords at astronomical prices. Seldom might they at some point make to the point of having the option to purchase their own property. Essentially, tenant farmers and sharecroppers turned out to be totally reliant upon the grower. Despite the fact that they were not "slaves" under the law, they needed opportunity to seek after their own lives (Gidron, 2018).

Although it cannot be considered a new political theory, populism has a lengthy history that can be traced to the ascent of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in Germany and Italy, respectively (Morelock, 2018). Since the close of the 20th century, its use in academia and the mainstream media has grown. For instance, this report's Web Science data reveals that, since 2010, the amount of research on populism has increased dramatically (Brown & Mondon, 2020). Furthermore, from 1990 to 2018, there were 46 populist parties worldwide, according to the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change research (Kely & Gultchin, 2018).

Populism has had four waves thus far (Pappas, 2019). Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany developed in the 1920s and 1930s, marking the beginning of the first wave. The second stage began with the end of World War II. Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Indra Gandhi in India, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a divided Pakistan, Sheikh Mujeeb in a newly established Bangladesh, and other populist leaders throughout the world heralded the emergence of the third phase. In the twenty-first century, populist leadership is not unheard of in Pakistan.

Populism as the buzzword of the twenty-first century. Buzzwords of the twenty-first century: the phrase is used to characterize both left and right-wing presidential candidates in the United States, as well as left-wing presidents in Latin America and right-wing opposition parties in Europe (Mudde & Cristobal, Populism, 2017).

As a powerful political force, populism has permeated modern politics and is constantly growing in practically every country in the globe. It is a political force that separates society's good and evil factions. According to this "thin layered ideology," society may be divided into two opposing, homogenous groups: "the corrupt elite" and "the pure people." Depending on the situation, populist movement leaders emphasize these distinctions in a number of ways. Populism is based on a variety of ideologies and is influenced by external factors. It may be characterized in a variety of ways and presents itself differently depending on political arrangements. Scholars disagree on all definitions of populism, rather than just one. But all definitions of populism have general agreement on some aspects: appeal to 'people' and denunciation or criticism of 'the elite', Populists argue that politics should be an expression of the *volante generale* (general will) of the people considered populism as "a political narrative that antagonizes the people and the corrupt elite, and that aims for policies that reflect the will and are understood by the people" (Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, 2004). It is a belief that the will of the ordinary people should have credence over that of the established elite. Populism structures social and political space by dividing it between a homogeneous block of straight-thinking "ordinary people" and the established elite, creating us and them, friend and foe (Droogen broeck, 2016).

Characterizing populism: "As a tenet or as a development, it is subtle and protean and troublesome. According to Lonesco and Gillner (1969), "it bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes." Its elusiveness was aided by the fact that populism is essentially regarded as a context dependent and chameleonic phenomenon (Taggart P., 1996). In the presentation of their book, Ionescu and Gellner observed that the love of individuals is the primary component of populism; no other clearer definition was given. Populism is a questionable term that gets away from sharp and uncontested definitions, since it "isn't a philosophy or a political system and can't be credited to a particular automatic substance," but instead is a type of aggregate activity meaning to drive (Acemoglu et al, 2013). Populist movements typically focus on issues such as

economic inequality, political corruption, and social injustice, and often reject the political establishment in favour of more direct democracy (Zaheer 2023).

Populism also has relation with democracy because it is based on a political system closely linked with democratic process. Democracy is a system which believes to establish a government system based on the popular will through the direct votes. The same is concern associated with populism where popular vote is casted through referendum and plebiscite (Moffitt, 2016). The major difference between populism and democracy is related with the poor performance of parliament which is replaced with popular leader. The major aim of populism is to grant more services to the people based on meritocracy (Norris & Franklin, 2003). Populism is not an autocratic or self-made political system rather more than like democratic setup as the leadership is elected through the democratic system of direct votes. The leadership has the main role in populism because he/she motivates the people to stand and raise their voices against the tyranny policies of the political elites. The leadership highlights the corruption of the political which arouse the common people through political awareness (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

When populists actually assume power, he warned, they will create an authoritarian state that excludes all those not considered part of the proper “people”. Beware the populists therefore. They may talk the democratic talk (Cox, 2018). The globalization of populism, or what Mudde termed as a populist zeitgeist, has altered our understanding of democracy as the rule of the people. Supremacy of the will of the people is a prime feature of populism as well as of democracy, Hence, Worsley, and Canovan, questioned the relationship between populism and democracy, noting that the appeal to public sovereignty is a prerequisite in almost all modern democratic regimes, making it difficult to separate populist and non-populist politics. Justice and human rights over majority rule and public sovereignty, liberals take away the main appeal of democracy its ability to transfer authority from the selected few to a majority (Batool, 2023).

Imran Khan has been described as a populist leader by a number of authors, both local and international. Falki (2021); Azam (2021); Rastogi (2021), Yilmaz, and Raja are among these authors. Saleem (2021), and a few different scholars. Falki (2021), while introducing a near examination of Tayyip Erdogan and Imran Khan, contends that both the pioneers embraced populism in their political practices. In any case, a few journalists, including Jalal (1995), composed that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Indra Gandhi, and Sheik Mujeeb were the egalitarian heads of the 1970s in South Asia. Previous Top state leader Imran Khan is popular for his changing accounts and his claims for the gear of the overall appointment of 2013 (Sunrise, Walk seventeenth, 2019). This examination could exclude the underlying long periods of his legislative issues from 1996 to the overall appointment of 2013, in light of the fact that during these years Imran Khan did not enjoy standard governmental issues; he didn't have a common or focal government. His ubiquity developed dramatically after the overall appointment in 2013. One more justification behind excluding the underlying long periods of his legislative issues in this examination is on the grounds that non accessibility of writing might uncover him as an egalitarian chief. As a result, the researcher has only included nine years of his political career, from the 2013 general elections to 2021. Additionally, his ascent was noticeable after the overall appointment of 2013. Nonetheless, after the overall decisions, he asserted that these were fake races that the Pakistan Muslim Association Nawaz PML(N) won the larger part and effectively shaped two commonplace gatherings and the public get together. First light paper run a story that cited Imran Khan says that numerous foundations, including some fragments of the military, upheld the PML (N), and subsequently it won the overall appointment of 2013 (Sunrise, 2013).

By assessing populist leaders and their agendas globally, the research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of populism from a global viewpoint. After gaining a thorough grasp of political populism, this study concentrated on Imran Khan's and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) populist policies in Pakistan from 2018 to 2023.

## **Populism across the Globe and in Pakistan**

From 1990 until the present, leaders of 46 egalitarian ideological groups or pioneers have been active in 33 different countries. Egalitarians in authority peaked between 2010 and 2014, and again in 2018, when 20 pioneers who supported freedom held administration positions. In the intervening period, populism has emerged as a powerful global force. From four in 1990 to twenty in 2018, the number of egalitarians in power has increased fivefold due to the startling rise of populism throughout the world during this period. This refers to countries where populism has historically been prevalent, such as those in Latin America, Eastern and Central Europe, Asia, and Western Europe.

Most striking is the rise of populism in large and systemically important countries. Whereas populism in power was once the purview of newly emerging democracies, populism is now in power in strong democracies like the US, Italy and India. Considering the dramatic uptick in the populist vote share, it should perhaps be no surprise that populist candidates are beginning to gain power as well (Gultchin, 2018). Over the last ten years, progressive and liberal circles have continued to express concern about the global development of regressive and reactionary populism. Modi in India, the Brexit campaign in the UK, Trump and the Tea Party phenomena, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, and Duterte in the Philippines are prime examples of this kind of populism. The emergence of anti-minority (particularly anti-Muslim) prejudice, the consolidation of power, and the erosion of institutional standards have all been facilitated or led by these figures and their groups have persisted in voicing worry over the rise of reactionary and regressive populism on a worldwide scale. Prime examples of this type of populism are Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, Duterte in the Philippines, Trump and the Tea Party movement, and Modi in India. These individuals and their organizations have either led or encouraged the rise of anti-minority (especially anti-Muslim) prejudice, the consolidation of power, and the degradation of institutional norms (Javed, 2021).

The way that Pakistan's domestic circumstances have been affected by the growth of populism and regressive politics throughout the region and abroad is an overlooked and little-discussed topic. The most noticeable influence has come from the east, where the ascent of Modi and the entrenchment of Hindutva in India have changed the internal political dynamics of Pakistan in a variety of ways. First, in response to Indian militarism along the border and in Kashmir, the security state is being strengthened, and its justification is being reinforced (Mansab, 2023).

What is an ignored and less examined point at any rate is the means by which the move of populism and moderate regulative issues nearby and past has genuinely influenced Pakistan's neighborhood circumstance? The most obvious flood has come from the east, with Modi's ascent to control and Hindutva's foundation in India reorienting Pakistan's native political components in different ways. The first is the expansion of the security state and the reduction of the rationale for its presence in spite of Indian militarism in Kashmir and on the border (Tahir, 2024).

A spillover, though less obvious, has been the delegitimization of what one can broadly call the liberal foreign and cultural policy segment in Pakistan, represented by groups and activists seeking greater normalization of ties with India, and improved people-to-people contact. With increased communal violence against Muslims and other minority groups, and the chauvinism of the Hindu right wing becoming more abrasive online and in India's domestic politics, the narrative of normalization and of revisiting statist discourse on India stands on considerably weaker grounds. This is in stark contrast to the previous decade, when these positions were usually well established in academic and intellectual discourse. Global populism in Pakistan is helping in the revitalization of what one could call Muslim modernism as cultural identity for the state and for large parts of urban middle-class society. While the roots of this lie in the attendant anxieties around the global war on terror, and the conflation of entire communities with

fundamentalist violence, in recent years, the populist assault on minority rights and cultures has made Islamophobia an even more pertinent question for diasporic and migrant populations. The adoption of those battles as Pakistan's foreign and cultural outlook by the state is an important happening linked deeply to these broader global issues (Ali, 2024).

### **Tehreek-E-Insaf's Emergence; Imran Khan on Populism's Rise to Power**

The well-known cricket player and philanthropist Imran Khan established Pakistan Tehreek-Insaf, a political party, in 1996 with the intention of combating corruption and advancing social welfare. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerged as the nation's most significant political force in 2013 parliamentary elections, having grown to be the second-largest party (Zeidan, 2024). Some analysts have categorized Imran Khan's ascent and the PTI's victory in 2018 in Pakistan's setting as components of a broader populist movement in world politics. Though there are errors in the judgment itself, the rationale for this classification is clear. Although Imran Khan advocated for accountability in a populist manner, his leadership of a coalition of elites in the existing quo was quite similar to that of the status quo similar to the actions of the Republican and Conservative parties in the US and the UK, respectively. In a similar vein, populism is frequently linked to greater cultural appeals to the "nation" as a whole rather than to individual factions within the population (Kalia, 2023).

### **Raising Anti-American And Anti-Military Slogans**

Khan seemed to have lost his mind due to the strong public sentiment in support of the army, despite having successfully pushed a narrative that claimed his removal through an otherwise lawful internal change was the result of a "foreign conspiracy to dislodge him with domestic facilitators." With the Shehbaz Sharif coalition government in disarray due to low performance and hyperinflation, allies have seized the chance to profit from Imran Khan's antics and the recklessness of his amateur, anarchist supporters. Imran Khan's dual gambit, which involved courting the army's high command to restore its support and then threatening it with internal pressure and pressure from retired military men, ultimately backfired when he crossed the Rubicon. The large-scale PTI defections recall one Describing how, shortly before the 2018 elections, several politicians in their hordes were "persuaded" to get on Khan's well-liked bandwagon. With the exception of the 1970 surveys, a leader's or party's electoral rating has never been sufficient throughout Pakistani election history. Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, who led Bangladesh following the Pakistani Army's defeat in East Pakistan, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who utilized the political vacuum left by the 1971 shock to become Pakistan's most powerful prime minister and establish a democratic republic in the country following the 1973 constitution, were two leaders who defied the Fuji playbook. However, the tale of Sheikh Mujib's horrific murder and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's legal murder illustrates the terrible tale of democracy in these two instances two nations (Alam, 2023).

Social media platforms are becoming an essential component of contemporary political campaigns, giving politicians previously unheard-of chances to interact with voters, sway public opinion, and rally support. Political campaigns continue to visit and converse with citizens around the nation. There is still benefit in having face-to-face conversations. In order to reach individuals, campaigns will also make use of phone calls, radio, TV, yard signs, and bumper stickers for automobiles. However, social media offers campaigns an inexpensive means of getting their message out there. These days, it is essential to every political campaign. Social media must be used by candidates and campaign managers to coordinate volunteers and generate funds Belier (Alam, 2023).

## **Using Social Media And Artificial Intelligence (AI) As A Populist Tools**

Global political leaders have realized in recent years that social media platforms may help them reach a large audience and spread their message. Imran Khan, the 22nd Prime Minister of Pakistan and a former cricket player who entered politics, is one such leader who has made good use of social media. With the goal of building a "New Pakistan" centered on the values of justice, accountability, and transparency, Imran Khan started his political career in 1996 by founding the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party (PTI Manifesto, 2018, p. 06). Khan rose to prominence in Pakistani politics over time as a result of his compelling personality and unwavering desire for change (Khan, August 03, 2023). Imran Khan saw social media platforms' potential as they rose in popularity and significance. Cut through the gatekeepers of traditional media and reach the general public directly. He embraced social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and others as effective tools for spreading his political message, rallying followers, and refuting false narratives. The triumph of Imran Khan's party in the 2018 general elections was largely due to his adept use of social media, and it was a momentous occasion for PTI as it established government for the first time (Alvi, 2023).

The party of former prime minister Imran Khan uploaded campaign videos to TikTok during a period when the Pakistani government was censoring the media. His followers held virtual gatherings online when the police forbade them from staging demonstrations. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) organized a digital revolution that defied obstacles, transcended prison walls, and resonated with millions of people at the center of Pakistan's political landscape, where tradition and modernity mix. This is the story of how the PTI, under the unstoppable Imran Khan, used social media and artificial intelligence (AI) as tools for mass mobilization to win a historic election. Through the organization of rallies on websites like X, YouTube, and TikTok, the party was able to mobilize fervent followers and leave a lasting impression online. Through these nontraditional techniques, PTI was able to connect and overcome physical barriers has millions of electors (The Economist, 2017).

Imran Khan's words were being delivered by PTI using generative AI despite his imprisonment. His addresses were delivered by an AI-generated voice, demonstrating the party's dedication to communicating with voters despite limitations on conventional channels. PTI superimposed old video of Khan on top of the AI-generated sounds to increase credibility. Sincere video snippets from his previous presentations introduced the AI section. Voters found resonance in the combination of new and old information. It introduced them to cutting-edge political tactics while serving as a reminder of Khan's legacy. Authenticity triumphed when the past and future collide. On Khan's Facebook page, PTI introduced webpages and a Chabot. These portals overcame quickly issued sanctions around Pakistan to share information about local candidates for the approaching elections. Active voter engagement was made possible by the Chabot's sharing of each constituency's WhatsApp channel information. Furthermore, once Mr. Khan was imprisoned, his followers recorded lectures in which they mimicked his voice using artificial intelligence. The traditional methods of influencing national politics are no longer effective; young mobilization and social media have taken center stage. Young people claim that his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or P.T.I., created political campaigns on social media that sparked a generational political awakening because they were unaffected by official censorship (The Guardians, 2019).

## **Populist Policies and Programs Of (PTI) And Their Impacts**

If elected, PTI leaders had promised their supporters that they would eliminate terrorism and corruption within 90 days. Both commitments required "returning every single penny of the looted money from the corrupt political leaders" (The News, 2018; The Express Tribune, 2018). According to Dawn (2018), the party unveiled a very comprehensive 100-day plan that outlined

the PTI's promises to address each and every issue the nation is currently facing. However, PTI struggled to fulfill its commitments, so not everything that is brilliant is gold.

In terms of the economy, the PTI has failed to achieve its goals of creating jobs, supporting the growth of small businesses, and supporting export-intensive industries. Prior to the outbreak, Pakistan's debt and liabilities increased by Rs11 trillion (over \$70 billion) in a single year. The Pakistan Stock Exchange's KSE-100 index experienced a sharp decline concurrently with one of its largest devaluations against the US dollar. The situation was made even worse by the unemployment rate of 9%, which was higher among young people, and the 7% inflation rate (Eusufzaye, 2018; Jamal, 2018). Due to its "simple" populist platform, the PTI struggled to keep its promises, much like other populist parties that had previously gained power. In

addition to the economic catastrophe, PTI fell short of fulfilling even its most fundamental commitments. The socialist plans influenced by Islamism were all failures. Investigations are underway into allegations of corruption including the Naya Pakistan Housing, youth initiatives, SMEs Loans, Ehsan welfare programs, populist solutions, Sehat Insaf Cards, and even Tree Tsunami (Qayyum, 2020; Khan, 2020; Mehmood, 2019). Despite the party's previous declaration that it would not "take the begging bowl" to the IMF to request a bailout, PTI ultimately chose an IMF package after a year of delay (FARMER, 2020). The party has retreated when confronted with the facts of a sizable population and almost depleted state finances. Populist discourse is challenging to translate into actual socio-economic change.

At various times, the PTI had criticized the party's reliance on loans from the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. The administration assumed power with the promise of a "quick fix" for the ongoing regional conflict; however, they have not been successful in resolving the Kashmir dispute with India since taking office. In point of fact, the situation has gotten worse since August 2019, when India rejected Articles 370 and 35A, bringing an end to the region's autonomy. Outside of China and Turkey, Pakistan's claims to the disputed territory have not found international support (Janjua, 2020). The PTI leadership at the foreign ministry frequently delegated responsibility to "lobbies" in Israel and India in order to conceal its diplomatic humiliation.

The party has once again failed to live up to expectations when it comes to its plans for institutional reform and accountability. Even though the PTI wanted to end "VIP culture" as it became more popular, its ministers regularly sent out full escorts, traveled abroad in opulent attire, and kept opulent homes (Pakistan Today, 2018). Furthermore, PTI has also failed its liberal supporters. Minority rights were harmed when Atif Mian was kicked out of the Economic Advisory Council (EAC) for his religious affiliation with the Ahmadi School (Dawn, 2020).

Furthermore, despite the PTI government's declaration of support for Sikh pilgrims visiting holy sites like Kartarpur, the nation frequently experiences forced conversions, kidnappings, target killings, and murders of Shia Muslims and non-Muslims. PTI says nothing on the majority of these matters. It was hardly surprising when Ali Muhammad Khan, Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, stated on Twitter that beheading is the appropriate penalty for people who ridicule Prophet Muhammad because many PTI members are either former JI members or members of JI's student wing (Inayat, 2020). PTI has made a point of highlighting its superior morality when it comes to humanitarian concerns, but it has fallen short here as well, either by remaining silent or by diverting attention from these problems. India is held accountable for funding "terrorism," hiding its failing populist goal behind yet another layer of populism.

In the past 2.5 years, PTI has taken an apologetic stand, admitting that some of its ministers have not performed up to par and that governing is "complex." Khan has nevertheless said, "The people have to decide whether or not we have improved their lives." The people who are at fault now are "the others," including those who opted not to pay taxes, not the government. (When PTI was in the opposition, it claimed that earlier governments had failed to collect the revenue).

When asked why Pakistan had such a high prevalence of child and sexual abuse in a recent interview, Khan blamed "Western porn sites" and "influences" rather than the necessity for the government to start having conversations about sex education and abuse. Crimes, once more avoiding accountability, assigning blame, and capitalizing on the widespread anti-Western emotions (The News, 2020).

When COVID-19 first started, the government did little more than advise people to "Aap ne ghabrana nahi hai" (don't panic). If PTI was not the majority party, the provinces were held accountable for the pandemic's devastation, or the general public's lack of cooperation was cited (John, 2020). Populists assign blame and present themselves as victims when they are unable to deliver.

PTI has trained in on the resistance straightforwardly also. The party's readiness to think twice about institutional trustworthiness and other state support points to endure is proof of its libertarian, not vote-based, convictions. PTI has upheld the military from its establishment, as seen by the PTI individuals' assault on the legal executive following the courts' choice to sentence President General Pervez Musharraf to death. In the wake of getting to work, PTI has changed its past situation with Musharraf to one of help for the association. Government Clergyman Fawad Chaudhry expressed: "You pushed the military an establishment against the wall." It is a foundation established on honor. If you continue in this manner, they will respond, correct? Moreover, he conveyed clear intimidations to the general set of laws (Qayum and Haider, 2019).

In conclusion, the case study of PTI from 2018 to 2023 underscores the complex dynamics of populism in Pakistan. Imran Khan's populist approach has brought significant changes to the country's political landscape, mobilizing a substantial portion of the population and challenging traditional political elites. However, this has also led to increased political instability and challenges to democratic norms. The PTI's tenure offers critical insights into the potentials and pitfalls of populist governance, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that addresses popular grievances while upholding democratic principles and institutional integrity.

The implications of this study extend beyond Pakistan, offering lessons for understanding populism's role in contemporary global politics. As populism continues to shape political discourses worldwide, the experiences of countries like Pakistan provide valuable perspectives on navigating the delicate balance between popular will and democratic governance. This thesis, therefore, contributes to the broader discourse on populism, democracy, and governance, highlighting the need for continued vigilance and critical engagement with populist movements and their impacts on political systems and societies.

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