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Populism In Pakistan: Political Rhetoric, Public Sentiment, And Democratic Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Populism is a significant debate in the field of political science. It is exercised in politics in different parts of the world and appeals most to the people as well. Since the inception of Pakistan, it has existed in Pakistan both in democratic and non-democratic regimes. The country had to face economic problems and political instability since the beginning. Though populism supports those who are left out of public life, it has brought challenges for democracy and the economy in Pakistan. The paper reveals that "New Pakistan" refers to an idolized society created by Islamist civilisationism, supported by strong feelings, nostalgia and identifying as victims. Qualitative approach is used to analyze how populism has affected political history in Pakistan. Looking at the background and society of Pakistan as well as the key elements influencing populism in the country, the research paper explores the process of populism in Pakistan and offers understanding of what benefits and issues it may cause. The findings of the study will have significant implications for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in Pakistan and beyond.

Keywords: Populism, Imran Khan, Political Rhetoric, Democratic Challenges, Islamic Populism.

Introduction

Populism refers to a range of political ideas that emphasize the idea of "the people" and often juxtapose this against "the elite". The term developed in the 19th century and has been applied to various politicians, parties, and movements since that time.

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Populism has established itself as an influential power that reshapes Pakistan's political framework while transforming voter behavior, state institutions and the way citizens communicate about politics. Populism presents itself through vesting charismatic leaders in power. Their movements reflect "pure people" against "corrupt elite" (Yilmaz et al., 2023) . Populist leaders use emotional appeals to gain power because the public displays broad resentment toward traditional political parties and economic distress, together with administrative incompetence. The second decade of the 21st century has seen a surge in populist movements and leaders around the world. Populism has been defined as a political phenomenon that pits the people against the elites, and which often involves anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Pakistani nationalism separates itself from other experiences because it combines three main elements: religious beliefs with nationalist sentiments, an enduring relationship between civilian government and military forces, and democratic system instability. The political growth of Pakistan directed the development of the populist movement within its borders. Populist propaganda strategies employed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s led the way for contemporary messages delivered by Imran Khan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) to drive political attachment among voters. Through nationalist and anti-establishment and sometimes religious storytelling, populist leaders build a diverse support network that goes beyond conventional political boundaries. Populists utilize a perfect representation of national revival by pledging economic success and moral leadership along with Islamic values to activate nationwide support for their cause.

The main characteristic of Pakistani populism is that it impacts public opinion by highlighting current problems. The existence of economic problems combined with corruption and high unemployment rates with escalating disagreements between political leaders and the population establishes space for populist ideas to flourish. Through the combined frustrations of the lower-middle classes with their distrust in mainstream parties, populists develop social cohesion built on fighting against current power structures. During election campaigns populist leaders present themselves as the sole authority able to defeat the "corrupt system" by making radical promises they cannot fully develop politically. The development of populist discourse heavily depends on political rhetoric. Pakistani populist leaders build connections with their

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supporters through social media as well as emotional speeches and expressive gestures while using passionate language. These simple political and economic matters get simplified through dual alignment structures that present "the oppressed against the oppressors," and "honest versus corrupt," and "true patriots against foreign-backed elites." The rhetorical technique works well for generating public backing while it further splits different political positions. While populism has provided a platform for addressing the grievances of marginalized communities, it has also posed significant challenges to democratic governance and economic stability. Populist leaders gain power through personalized political appeals instead of democratic processes which diminishes institutional systems of checks and balances since they argue to have exclusive ownership of public will representation.

Public sentiments, which result from past issues and current economic conditions, drive the growth of populist movements. The repeated military takeovers and political turbulence in this nation have led people to doubt traditional institutions throughout the country. The failure of democracy to produce justice, along with equitable governance, generates ideal conditions for populist leadership to succeed. Public opinions across all platforms of media have substantially influenced how people perceive situations. Social media provides populist leaders with strong tools to connect directly with followers by bypassing established authoritative restrictions. A lack of filters during this form of communication leads to abundant misinformation and facilitates the propagation of conspiracy theories while deepening societal political division. The main benefit populism provides to democracies through popular energization occurs through its ability to activate disengaged citizen groups, yet the approach threatens democratic institutions. Populist movements establish leader-people relationships above institutional governance, so they weaken democratic structures that include judicial systems and legislative bodies, and electoral bodies. The history of Pakistan is deeply intertwined with the rise of populism that shaped the country's politics from its very inception. Populist leaders often position themselves as outsiders who are not part of the established political class, and they may criticize the perceived corruption and inefficiency of the existing political system. The degradation of the rule of law, combined with reduced media liberties and hindered political opposition, becomes a result when these phenomena occur. The embrace of passionate

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rhetoric instead of policy makes populism achieve temporary political wins, which undermine sustained institutional growth. The populist trends in Pakistan will have a central role in forming its future political outcomes, with uncertain positive or negative consequences.

Literature Review

The chapter titled *Pakistan: Islamist Civilizational Populism* by Ihsan Yilmaz, Fizza Batool, and Kainat Shakil, published in 2023 examines the dual influence of Islamist principles combined with populist discourse on the current Pakistani political system. The civilizational populism of Islamists in Pakistan has taken shape through Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its leader, Imran Khan, who has profoundly affected the country's politics. Through this populist approach, Islamists join forces with populist arguments to form a unique political discourse focused on Islamic values, defining the nation's identity. Civilizational populism in this nation seeks the recovery of Islamic principles by tracing lessons from Madinah's system while creating a plan for a "New Pakistan" based on Islamic governance. Hybrid populism emerged as a dominant force after Pakistan entered the war on terror because this fight contributed to anti-Western sentiment and strengthened religious ideologies. Strong acceptance of this political change among people has resulted in intensifying polarization while marginalizing non-religious leaders who stirred social conflicts between different groups (Yilmaz et al., 2023).

Prashant Rastogi's article, *The Articulation of Discourse in Populism: Understanding 21st Century Pakistan* (2021), investigates how political leaders in Pakistan utilize discourse to develop political narratives while generating public support alongside their "us vs. them" framework. An evaluation of this research focuses on emotional communication styles and rhetorical methods that connect populist beliefs with societal conflicts and both religious and secular claims, as well as criticism targeted at intellectual classes. The idea of articulation creates tools to discover how varying elements unite into unified populist idea that appeals to various social groups. The article addresses the impact of present-day elements, including social media and economic disparities, and civil-military power shifts on Pakistani populism. Rastogi explores Pakistani populism to produce insights about movement attraction along with communicative methods and social-political outcomes in modern

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Pakistan (Rastogi, 2021).

Saqlain Hassan's chapter *Populism and popularity in Imran Khan's 2018 election speeches* published in 2019 analyzes strategic communication methods that defined how people viewed issues. In Khan's discourse populism emerges as he presents himself as a reformer while showing opponents as corrupt elite members to create the essential opposing sides. Hassan explains how Khan implements Aristotelian rhetorical techniques by using ethos, which establishes his credibility through political experience, and pathos, which uses religious and nationalistic appeals, and also employs logos, which presents factual economic data. Specific linguistic tools consisting of pronouns together with predictive statements and Islamic references allowed him to strengthen his bond with voters. The research conducted by Afzal and Hassan advances knowledge about political communication through the investigation of how language shapes political identities, alongside affecting voter behavior throughout South Asian populist movements (Hassan, 2019).

Kainat Shakil and Ihsan Yilmaz in the article *Religion and Populism In The Global South: Islamist Civilisationism Of Pakistan's Imran Khan* published in 2021 states that Khan combines Islamic teachings with Western narrative opposition to establish his populist image. The Pakistani political system developed religion as a tool for power consolidation which Khan uses by presenting an Islamic model of governance while portraying his image as an ethical leader who combats corrupt political figures. His populist discourse establishes dual levels through which he shows the people as devoted Muslims who accept him as their sole defender against internal and external enemies. Through social media, his message reaches a wider audience because he combines conventional Islamic beliefs with current political speech. However, contradictions between his promises and governance, such as the Islamization of education despite pledges of deradicalization, highlight the challenges of religious populism in practical governance (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021).

The article *Populism in Pakistan: The Exclusionary-Inclusionary Divide in the Politics of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan* by Fizza Batool examines the opposing populist approaches with special focus on their effects on Pakistan's political sphere and democratic structures. Under the influence of religion and civil-military relations, and socio-economic factors, Pakistan has developed populism through two distinct

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political frameworks represented by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan. Bhutto followed inclusionary populism by championing socialist policies alongside nationalization measures and economic justice to support disadvantaged groups and oppose elite abuses. In his vision, he stood as a protector of common people against elite powers. Current Pakistani Premier Imran Khan displays exclusionary characteristics through his presentation as a reformer who combats corruption by employing religious nationalism while targeting established elites as Pakistan's main source of issues. These political leaders deployed religious strategy for different purposes, such that Bhutto sought social class integration whereas Khan employed religion for nationalist identity projection and support consolidation (Batool, 2023).

Research Gap

Research about populism in Pakistan has been extensive, but important critical gaps persist. Academic research currently concentrates on populist rhetorical methods and ideological patterns without performing evaluations of public opinion according to social characteristics. Researchers document democratic regression, yet further investigation is necessary to establish the complete institutional impact on media and the judiciary. Research on how populism appeals differently to different geographical areas and social classes in Pakistan remains limited, which creates a knowledge gap regarding its various effects throughout the nation.

Research Question

What is the impact of populist movements and public opinion on Pakistan's political landscape, and how do they challenge the country's democratic institutions?

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to study Pakistani populism by analyzing political situation together with public emotions and democratic limitations in Pakistan. Qualitative method provides a deep examination of populist communication and governance consequences by enabling comprehensive studies that go beyond statistical information. The research will analyze PTI leader Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party through a case study approach. The research also uses secondary resources consisting of speeches and news articles, and social media content, together with academic literature to examine populist rhetoric adopted by each leader. Due to restrictions from the available secondary data and possible sources of bias

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within these documents, the primary focus remains on Imran Khan and Bhutto's populist movements. Ethical considerations will guide the entire research process for maintaining respect for fairness together with privacy protection. This qualitative case study research approach seeks to develop extensive knowledge about Pakistani populism together with its detrimental effects on democratic structures.

History of Populism in Pakistan

There are two Phases in Pakistan's history that make up their tradition of populism. At the beginning, the main populist figures were Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman. Phase Two highlights the populist leader Imran Khan. For almost two decades after its formation, Pakistan was unable to form a successful democratic system. General Ayub Khan appointed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto as foreign minister during his leadership. After the 1965 war, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto disputed over the terms of the Tashkent act that was formed by Pakistan and India at the time. This was a point on which Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto spoke out against General Ayub Khan. So, he offered his resignation to General Ayub Khan and started his own campaign (Ahmad 2020). As a result, he toured various cities across the nation and made many people happy. The number of his supporters rose day by day which led to the creation of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The low level of political culture in Pakistan during the early years gave Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto the opportunity to be popular in West Pakistan. In contrast, Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rehman, became the leader of a major political movement in East Pakistan. However, Sheikh Mujeeb wanted more authority for the provinces and requested rights for the East wing of that country. As political tension was very high in both groups at the time, the 1970 elections were organized. After the 1970 elections, each leader took the majority of votes in their respective factions. Most seats in West Pakistan went to Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and in East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujeeb won more. At that point, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto did not want to accept Sheikh Mujeeb and Sheikh Mujeeb did not want to accept Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. If the leaders couldn't agree on sharing political power, the nation was divided and Bangladesh was formed. Some other causes also helped, but the biggest factor that fueled things was the mindset of the two leaders involved. The main challenge with populist leaders is they don't look after their political rivals. Many politicians seem to believe they represent everyone and act on their own behalf. In addition, we are responsible for directing the

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country on behalf of its people. Competitors in politics should be seen as people you compete with, not people you fight against.

Populism, Religion, and Rhetoric

Imran Khan is not the first in Pakistan to use religion as a political device. Still, Imran's changing statements help us see how Islamist civilizational populism is growing stronger in Pakistani politics today. Populism has roots that go back to when Pakistan was founded. It is possible to see the story of Pakistan's creation through a populist lens because it supposedly gave voice to Muslims in India seeking to break free from British imperial rule and Hindu dominance (Rastogi 2021). The beginning story of Muslims unit the populist tradition was present in the country after it became independent. In 1965, Fatima Jinnah withstood military dictator Ayub Khan as she fought for democracy during her pro-democracy campaign. Her ideas were aligned with populists, pushing for real democracy and putting the people's will back into power, facing off with an authoritarian regime (Zaheer and Chawla 2019)

During the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gave more shape to populism by building the Pakistan People's Party, advocating for economic justice, against capitalism and against corruption. Bhutto's "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" speech assured basic needs for the unprivileged and declared the military and feudal elite were wronging them. He supported a populist form of Islamic unity and helped establish the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during his time in office (Khan 2003). During the 1980s, under General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's government introduced an Islamization program that guided important changes to the constitution. The Federal Shariat Court was set up and the Hudood Ordinances were approved as sharia measures despite concerns about their gender affected nature (Yilmaz 2011, 2014a; Ahmed and Yilmaz 2021). Under Zia's government, rigorous control by the state was combined with strong religious appeals to people which represented a major shift in the nation's political views. Between 1988 and 2001, multiple kinds of populism kept influencing what was said in politics. While the PPP stayed with its left-wing populism, Nawaz Sharif developed his own Islamist populist conservatism. After the coup of 1999 led by General Pervez Musharraf, mainstream populism was less visible, but appeared again in harder and non-official styles. Passages like this In these groups, for instance Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TL), made

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use of religious populism and highlighted "the elite," "Western puppets," and "kafirs," (Cohen 2004; Khan 2005; Malik 2018).

Imran Khan; From Reformist to Islamist Civilizationalist

In an already rich political history, Imran Khan began his political career in the late 1990s and brought a new change to Pakistani populism. After leading Pakistan to its one and only Cricket World Cup win in 1992, Khan earned a national hero title and began focusing on creating Good Samaritan image by establishing the Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital in 1994. Instead of joining an old party upon returning to Pakistan in 1996, Khan decided to create his own which made his rise to power less likely to come with family ties and gave him a clean image. During those early years, Khan spoke mostly about social and economic populism and against the establishment. He called out the ruling group for their widespread dishonesty, growing divide between rich and poor and weakening of the public sector. Each of these themes found their way to the hearts of the disenchanted urban middle and young, as they moved away from conventional politics. PTI maintained a straightforward view that politics divided the community into virtuous many and corrupt rulers. His first reputation as a cricket player gradually gave way to a more serious political image. Eventually, he openly reflected his Muslim background by what he wore, how he spoke and his own symbolic actions. His populism in the early years had an Islamic component, yet, from his early days, the religious part proved to be stronger than anything else, especially after the 9/11 attacks.

It was by the time of the 2013 elections that his effort to merge reformist and anti-power ideas with talk of Islamic values gave PTI strong momentum. He idealized the past of Islam and frequently compared it to what he saw as Western degeneration which had breakfast Pakistan's traditions and leaders. The mixing of populism and Islamism formed a strong political image that attracted conservative Muslims and fit into broader stories of Muslim hardship and efforts to overcome it. He has also started to build a kind of horizontal populism, setting real believers apart from those he accuses of dishonesty and loyal citizens from foreigners unfairly criticizing the country. His comments about the West grew more about politics and he often referred to his opponents in his own country as evil traitors and not honest members of the democratic system. PTI's story relied heavily on ideas of purity, people betraying each

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other and divine judgment—all familiar themes in a deeply religious community going through many tough times. After he was elected in 2018, Khan continued to talk about populist issues. He regularly spoke about making Riyasat-e-Madina and called out global leaders to prove his point: that he stands for the true Pakistan and its people alone.

At that time, Imran Khan created the idea that he was an outsider going against the system which was reported on TV newscasts each night (Hasan 2017). In 2008, Khan was elected to the National Assembly after General Musharraf's regime came to an end. At this stage, PTI made Islamism a main part of its populism, but it was presented in terms of human rights. Pakistan paid a huge price in the Afghan conflict: over 83,000 people died and its economy suffered from $126 billion in damages caused by insecurity (as mentioned by Jamal and Iqbal). Many Pakistanis began to positively view the mujahideen and the Taliban, thanks to their involvement in the Soviet–Afghan war in the 1980s (Janjua 2019). Against all this, Khan started supporting the Taliban and criticizing "the West" for leading to the crisis. He opposed Musharraf's relationship with the US, objected to American drone attacks, stopped NATO trucks from using land routes and even took a rally through places hit by militants (Chowdhry & Houreld 2012). His speeches were full of Islamic populism said to defend human rights. They (his allies) asked us, "If the people affected are humans… Using drones to strike is against human rights" (Chowdhry & Houreld 2012). Jenkins set up the story to present the West as a group working in secret against the enemies of globalism. Jimmy claimed the militant groups in the region were built by the CIA and Pakistan to fight the Soviets and, after the US withdrew, Pakistan must handle the problems on its own (Press Trust of India 2019).

Khan, like Turkey's Erdoğan (Yilmaz 2021), made anti-Western ideas a key part of his populist-Islamist messages. Roughly one decade ago, he released a video of the Quran being profaned and implied the US was responsible which then led to riots in Afghanistan and took 16 lives (Rajghatta 2005; The Week 2020). Populism triggered a change in thinking, so that his message focused on "the West fighting against Islam," rather than specific national opponents. He described the Afghan Taliban as rightful rebels against the government, but he called local extremists like TLP destabilizing and claimed such groups relied on foreign funds (Afzal 2019;

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Mullah 2017). In 2012, Zakir Naik said: Anybody standing up for their freedom is on a jihad. Those involved in fighting in Afghanistan are described as fighting a jihad" (Boone 2012; Dawn 2012). At home, Khan worked with well-known right-wing Islamist parties, mainly the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and tried to stop army action against jihadist groups (The Guardian 2005). The name "Taliban Khan," given by foreign reporters, came to represent why his supporters stood by him. His supporters grew when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021 which he called a victory over the Western "mental influence" (Ellis-Petersen 2021).

Khan's party, the PTI, won in KPK during the 2013 elections which helped him strengthen his popular platform. Sharif's angry comments about the "corrupt elite" PPP and PML-N were his main focus in interviews and big rallies (Mufti, 2016; Mullah, 2017; Mehdi, 2013). He created a narrative that united both styles of populism: people versus elite and Muslims versus the West. Foreign influence was highlighted when political elites depended on loans from the IMF to make decisions for their countries (Kari 2019). Contrary to expectations, PTI's government in KPK took federal money for development and approved military activities in the province (Gishkori 2020). The JI within PTI's coalition urged to include religious material and required Quran classes in the curriculum (Abbasi 2017; Dawn 2014). During PTI's time in office in 2016 and 2018, the KPK government distributed more than 500 million PKR to Darul Uloom Haqqania, claiming it would moderate the seminary. PTI worked together with Islamist preacher Tahir-ul-Qadri to organize the large Azadi protest in 2014. It represented the point when PTI began allying with the religious right. Although PTI fought against corruption before, when in office the party began accepting defectors and invested state goods in vote-gathering efforts (Sadaqat 2017). Khan began to introduce the phrase "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan) in this period which helped form the basis for the PTI's 2018 election campaign. The country's populist rhetoric was combined into a large civilizationist story under this vision. New Pakistan, as promised, was an Islamic society where corruption ended, youth were true to Islam and Western culture played no role whatsoever. Khan spoke of giving every Pakistani housing, health care, food assistance and reforms in education, just as the original Riyasat-e-Madina did (Dawn 2021a; Shaukat 2021). Khan insisted that having the borrowed money returned would help build an Islamic welfare state, obviating any

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dependence on the IMF and foreign nations. Nevertheless, these commitments did not lead to any real results. He quoted the stories of the four early caliphs, urging everyone to stay strong in adversity, like early Muslims did. When PTI won national elections in 2018, Khan was already fully committed to a civilizationist Islamist populism. We saw this division attract people opposed to the corrupt ruling classes, while at the same time defining Western states, India and liberal Pakistanis as "others" outside the movement. Even those with progressive or secular ideas—both inside and outside the country—were attacked for being unfaithful to the nation's cultures (Kermani 2021; Hamid 2018; Khan 2020; Backer 2015). Pakistan, where populism and Islamist movements have thrived, happily merged the two in PTI. The party's role evolved from working for anti-corruption to advancing an idea that Muslims in Turkey are under attack. So, this approach explained why PTI worked to defend Pakistan against external challenges and why it proposed a reborn Pakistan with a central belief in the "New Pakistan."

Populist Civilisationism and the Making of "New Pakistan"

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was officially elected to power following the 2018 general elections under the leadership of Imran Khan and under the slogan "New Pakistan." It covers Khan's efforts to carry out his popular and Islamist messages in real life situations. By suggesting major changes in line with a revival of Islamic beliefs and giving importance to popular civilisationism, Khan tied a promising future to a 'golden age' from the past. Yet, Khan's time as prime minister saw a lot of empty promises, bad handling of the economy and failures in government. Because most of his bold promises were never achieved, he was nicknamed "U-turn Khan" (Dawn 2020, 2021b; Mumtaz 2021). In view of growing opposition, Khan usually argued for civilisation to appeal to his conservative followers. He and PTI acted as protectors of Islamic morals against liberal people within Pakistan and foreign opponents, according to his message. In his speeches, Khan repeatedly pointed to the establishment, by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), of Riyasat-e-Madina, considered by Muslims to be an Islamic welfare state. He often praised this time as standing for justice, meritocracy and receiving new knowledge. After settling in Madina, fifteen centuries ago, our Holy Prophet (PBUH) founded the world's first welfare state. Within just a few decades after Muhammad, Muslims created the leading civilization of their time (Geo News

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2021a). Although no clear support was found for the success of Khan's health cards and housing schemes, he continued to present New Pakistan as a good example for the Muslim world (AIR News 2020; The News 2021a).

To shape the morals and cultures of most Pakistanis, who are young, Khan used social media as a key strategy (Batool et al., 2021). Much of his messages included negative thoughts about the West along with pan-Islamic content from religious poetry to recommendations for TV programs like Diriliş: Ertuğrul. He strongly opposed what he referred to as the West's Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll culture in a 2020 interview, saying it led to many divorces and decreased morality (The Tribune 2020). Khan shared pro-Turkish neo-Ottomanist news to offer Islamic responses to Western sources. The government arranged the National Amateur Short Film Festival (NASFF), where new filmmakers were urged by officials to make both original and ethical films. Interestingly, Bikram said, "Using English and wearing Western clothing is a sign of low self-esteem" (The News 2021b). Openly questioning this vision, especially novels from an open-minded or feminist perspective, were regularly removed from the air or called "un-Islamic" by PEMRA officials (BBC 2020; Isani & Alavi 2020).

Gender, Education, and the Populist Moral Order

Out of all Khan's ideas, women's rights and roles drew the most disagreement from the public. Manyui people claimed feminist actions, mainly the Aurat March, were brought in from other places and did not fit with Islam (Images-Dawn 2020). He complained that the feminist idea of women only highlights their rights and is responsible for making mothers less respected: "I disagree with this movement that denies the importance of a mother" (Sethi 2018). Many people heavily criticized what he said after reports of sexual violence. During a 2021 interview, he caused outrage by saying: "Women's clothes influence men, since no man is a robot" (The News 2021b). In this way, they continued to establish that how a woman behaved was more important than how a man behaved which supported patriarchy. On Independence Day in 2021, around 400 men harassed a woman in the streets of Lahore. Even though there was much anger, Khan did not speak out at first. Later, he pointed to youth for misusing mobile phones and not knowing enough Islam (The Express Tribune 2021). With such statements, the focus was moved away from male control by bringing back

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culture and religion. Khan adopted populist civilisationism in reforming Pakistan's educational system. The guise of equity allowed the government to introduce a single curriculum, the SNC which had a strong religious slant and was mandatory for all schools. It is said by Hoodbhoy (2020b) and others that the SNC teaches more about religion than regular madrassas and uses clerics instead of established teachers. Khan said this program was needed to set young people free from Western culture, since simply following it can make you a slave (Dawn 2021a).

According to the PTI government, Quranic learning was required for graduation at every level in higher education. The introduction of new courses like Muamilaat and Islam aur daur-e-hazir ke taqazay, together with these curriculum changes, showed a strong effort to bring Islam into the curriculum as called for by PTI's populist policies. The government's strategy now includes broadening connections with Muslims in the world beyond Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (Bezhan & Khattak, 2020; Siddique, 2020). Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have all been at the focus of outreach by Pakistan's top leaders (Huseynov, 2021; TRT World, 2021; Kowalski, 2019). It is the Turkey–Pakistan alliance that is most visible of all these stronger relations. This situation makes the ideas of "the people," or "the pious," and "the others" universal, beyond nations. This section includes the West, non-Muslims, liberals and many groups outside of the Sunni faith. Often, people say this group introduces foreign ideas and poses real danger to the nation. During his visit to those impacted by a terror attack affecting the Shia Hazara community, we saw this style of rhetoric. The community learned about India's role during the course of the visit. Khan said, "no doubt this has been part of an ongoing plan," and appealed to everyone to withdraw from the protests. He explained that his ultimate goal goes beyond uniting his country; he also wants to connect all Muslims around the world. So that there is peace, we have worked to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together" (Shahid, 2021). Using civilisationism, Khan often presents himself as the guiding figure for Muslims and blames foreign "enemies" for what's wrong. He has regularly employed social media and world forums to show IS as victims, focusing on issues such as increased Islamophobia in parts of the West. He calls bans on head covering and the hijab forms of "secular extremism" (Dawn, 2021c; Raza, 2021; UN, 2020). Instead such actions look like they are driven by ideology, rather than compassion for others. Khan

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has avoided speaking about several issues such as the constant desecration of religious sites, forced religious conversions and putting non-Muslims in jail incorrectly, according to Gannon (2020). His lack of comment on the suffering of Uighur Muslims in China makes this approach even clearer. Khan has declared that because Pakistan and China have a strong alliance built on trust, he supports China's narrative on the genocide. We take their word for what is going on in their programmes in Xinjiang (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Khan chooses which Muslim countries to work with and often criticizes the West, both helping his form of Islamist populist civilisationism. This story assures the ummah that its members are constantly vulnerable because of others. The result is that people in Muslim communities start to hold onto their Muslim identity even tighter and view those who disagree as treacherous and harmful to Islam. Because of this, there is more fear, hatred and suspicion directed at "the others". Because of this kind of debate, it feels more necessary to a lot of people to have a "strongman" like Khan. His management of media, schools, grants to women and diplomatic ties clearly helps "New Pakistan" picture Pakistanis—and Muslims—as heroes, blaming all Western principles for neocolonialism and hegemony. Because of his populist civilisationism mixed with Islamism, Khan portrays himself as someone who guards the society during times of trouble. Every opposing perspective is seen as a threat or was nine by Western forces. Ideologically, hardliners view both groups as either weakened by Western teaching or members of schemes against the community (people) and the Muslim nation (ummah). With this approach, there is not much room to disagree and less place for pluralism. Given that radical right-wing ideas have already spread, accepting populism helps make people more xenophobic toward other nations, ethnicities and religions.

Political Rhetoric as a Populist Tool

For years in Pakistan, politicians have won popular support by using emotional language to present themselves as standing up for the suffering people facing the abuses of corrupt officials. Slogans from political parties, big rallies and planned stories have helped gather support from the public. Using the strategies above, they explain tough socio-political problems simply and steer people's anger toward those in authority. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto set a high standard for early populist leaders in Pakistan.

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By saying, "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" (bread, clothing, shelter), he pointed out the working class's economic issues and meant to share resources widely. Bhutto used his speeches to tell a tale of how the poor and disenfranchised could rise above the elite and the feudal families. His style was filled with emotion, yet it also revealed a new organizing strategy for the party, even if its real effects on institutions were less clear. After many decades, Imran Khan's party started using a different kind of populism. By using phrases such as "New Pakistan" and attacking those he calls the "corrupt elite," Khan came across as someone willing to change the system, challenge dynastic politics and be a different sort of alternative for voters. He said he would sweep away the existing system and suggest easy answers to age-old problems. Though it helped many, it also attacked political groups the president disagreed with and greatly divided the nation. Both approaches reassigned various economic and governance problems to a simple division between good and bad, with honesty opposing dishonesty. It's common for populist speakers to use this trick, shifting frustration about society's problems onto individuals or groups, making the narrative sound good but not thought-out.

Shaping Public Sentiment

In Pakistan, populist political messages draw heavily from public issues and discontent with the economy, mistakes by leaders and uneven social standards. Whenever inflation, unemployment and lousy services continue, leaders focus on pledges to change the situation, forgetting to explain how they plan to deliver those changes. Talking to emotion can increase the ability to organize and persuade others. Often, politicians use national pride, their religious views or why they think they are right to motivate people to seek radical change. Because of how emotion-filled they are such stories promise improvement and let people vent their anger together. At the same moment, using populist language usually widens differences among people in society. It depicts the political scene as being fought between just and oppressed people on one side and wicked or foreign-aided traitors on the other. "Us vs. them" themes now play a big role in the political discussions happening in Pakistan. Leaders regularly present themselves as the answer to everyone's troubles which means they undermine both their challengers and the organizations that check them. The result is that the public considers speaking out against the government to be the same as undermining or

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betraying it. This way of viewing things builds support, but it badly weakens the unity of the nation. It inspires people to focus on ongoing battles instead of working together and cooperating which countries need to remain healthy and united.

The Democratic Cost of Populism

Although appealing to the masses may give quick results, in the long run, it has important negative effects on democracy. Populism is meant to make citizens believe that their will, as decided by one person, is at odds with established liberal democratic values. Here, it has shown up as attempts to discredit the courts, silence free thinkers in the media and view elections as unfair unless the results go in favor of their own cause. More and more, the Election Commission, the courts and Parliament are depicted as hindering democracy instead of supporting it. If leaders rely on the people's support alone to give them legitimacy, it leaves them immune to control by institutions and the law. Further such regimes commonly call opposition parties traitors or foreign-controlled, with the goal of marginalizing them. Elitism in this way lowers the ability for democracy to survive in society. Instead of encouraging understanding, political conversations focus more on arriving at the top choice, so agreement and negotiating rarely happen. What is most alarming is that populist leaders often take all the power and use the people's support as their excuse. As a result, democratic systems become less stable, the balance of power becomes confusing and the country tends to slip toward authoritarianism. In Pakistan's uncertain democracy, this situation endangers the continuation of democracy.

Media and Social Media: Fueling the Rhetoric

Nowadays, populist messages in Pakistan reach many people mainly through traditional media outlets and the internet. At one time, television talk shows were for political debates, yet now they are mostly for creating excitement and disputes. Since politicians are rewarded for making brief and exciting statements, the level of public debate is less meaningful and often leads to accusations. These days, Twitter (now X) and Facebook have turned into major sources of populist messaging. They turn these platforms into places to share and decide on their party's narrative, not just to interact with their voters. Short, trending online videos, organized campaigns and crowd-sourced online aggression often make the media noisy but truthless. How algorithms work can cause more distortion in what we hear. If content touches on emotions, is

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highly opinionated or is very shocking, it is more likely to be put into users' newsfeeds by algorithmic systems. So, because populist claims are designed to be emotive, they get more circulation and attract larger audiences than complex political debates. In effect, people end up seeing information online that supports their original beliefs. Consequently, political reality is split and tribalism grows, making it tougher to gather ideas from different parties or talk about democratic issues.

Conclusion

Appealing to feelings and criticism of the elite while promising many reforms, populism in Pakistan has risen to play a powerful but controversial role in politics. People like Imran Khan have used populist ideas to get the masses on their side by showing they represent the ordinary citizen against a corrupt ruling class. With the result, they can receive strong backing from the youth, middle class and communities living in other countries. When Pakistanis hear the populist narrative, they often find quick and easy answers to serious problems, namely, corruption, differences in wealth and inefficient leadership. Although this change has encouraged many people to participate politically again, it has likewise brought about increased division and weakness within institutions. When traditional bodies like the judiciary, parliament and media oppose populist leaders such leaders try to invalidate them through attacks, thus straining democracy. In addition, Pakistani populism is not limited to one set of beliefs. Members of both political parties have turned to populism to build up their influence. Appeals to nationalism, religious signs or dislike of the West allow populism to fit the mood of the times and increase separation and exclusion. The rise of populism is powered by what the public feels and thinks. Many people have stopped believing in government, inflation is increasing, joblessness is rising and the idea that the elite dominates the system has made large groups of citizens open to populist ideas. Now, thanks to social media, leaders can avoid going through official channels and communicate with many people quickly. There have been times when populism encouraged more political involvement and demanded better accountability, but it has also inspired quick thinking, left public services weak and made matters about individuals rather than policies. Because populist politics usually leads to empty handling of issues, there is a cycle where people expect much and are often disappointed. The problems with democratic institutions in Pakistan, marked by

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inequality, lack of responsibility and weak organizations, cause a gap that populists are swift to take advantage of. Strengthening democracies, encouraging education on politics and fostering a political discourse that protects the country's future over quick populist success are needed to move Pakistan beyond unstable populist politics.

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