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The Rise of Populism in Pakistani Politics: Challenges for Democratic Stability

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the emergence and entrenchment of populist politics in Pakistan and its implications for the country's democratic stability. The rise of populism, characterized by anti-elitist rhetoric, charismatic leadership, and the direct appeal to "the people," has become increasingly visible in Pakistan's political landscape, particularly since the late 2000s. Through a detailed exploration of populist narratives, this study highlights how political leaders capitalize on public discontent, economic grievances, and institutional inefficiencies to foster a populist image. While populism may invigorate political participation and challenge entrenched elites, it simultaneously poses significant risks to democratic norms, including the erosion of institutional checks and balances, increased political polarization, and a weakening of representative institutions. The paper focuses particularly on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under Imran Khan, analyzing how populist strategies were deployed to mobilize mass support and challenge traditional political dynasties. However, it also draws attention to the inherent contradictions within populist governance, such as the reliance on the same institutions it often seeks to undermine. The study concludes that while populism may offer short-term political gains, its long-term impact on Pakistan's democratic trajectory remains fraught with uncertainty and potential instability. The paper emphasizes the need for institutional resilience, civic education, and inclusive political discourse to counter the disruptive tendencies of populist politics and sustain democratic development.

Keywords: Populism, Pakistani Politics, Democratic Stability, Imran Khan, PTI, Political Polarization, Institutional Erosion, Charismatic Leadership, Anti-elitism, Political Mobilization.

Introduction

Populism has rapidly spread around in the Pakistani political landscape. It is not a new phenomenon in the subcontinent. Historically it has planted its roots, since the era of the Mughal Empire, chieftains used to gather pearl and break the fort of kings to elect themselves as a ruler. Similarly, the Britishers also fostered populism in the subcontinent to conquer the region. But now the situation has become worst. It has opened the doors of hatred, intolerance, and discrimination (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023). It has been tear gas for the Indian society, where people are killed, jailed, and silenced for raising rebellious voices against the discriminatory policies. In Pakistan, PTI very swiftly captured the reins of government and some of the steps were taken suddenly after coming into power which was very disappointing and memorable for the general

public who had attached so many expectations with PTI. Similarly, as for being an important frontline ally of the US in the war on terror, Pakistan has been facing the crucial counter-effects of populism in the form of terrorism for the last two decades. Religiously lensed populist perspective has been ignited, apathetic uprisings of a certain sect, group, and ethnicity have been embroiled in affecting the drastic socio-political dynamics and democratic stability of the state (Rehman).

Populism pervasively tenders ideological shades and demands to have the utmost supremacy across every facet of state irrespective of any checks and balances and separated powers of three organs, and purge the morality, liberal and democratic values, and emboldened the constituents to enhance disrespects and ridicules the juridical performers as former President of the US Donald Trump cliques on the election notion as “incendiary rebellion and contradictory scandal,” and foists to bind the judiciary should in-read the particular puppeted notes, and hampered all the spoils of the US capital in the abutment of this notion in his later drive-affrontments. Britain dissents the incidence of four-year tush Trump-lead-turmoil, and the security establishments tantamount international reprobates and terror threats it occasioned, compounded in wane the grace ability of the democratic administration of the most fortified democratic state of the globe as opined by (K M, 2017).

Historical Context of Populism in Pakistan

Since independence and partition, the Pakistani electorate and political arena have been increasingly subject to populism across intermittent epochs. History shows this sentiment finding a foothold in seminal figures and coming to the forefront of the political landscape in various movements. The retention of some populist policies in order to validate and favor its democratic government has had the unintended consequence of emboldening the populist opposition, imperiling the stability of democracy (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023). In order to shed light on what this iterative phenomenon may mean for Pakistan, it is imperative to first look at the political, economic, and social landscapes from which populist grievances arise.

Pakistan suffered under various and varied military regimes and has endured significant shifts in socio-economics based upon neoliberalist policies, British colonial inheritances, and its position within South Asian culture and geopolitics. An increase in commodity prices throughout the 1970s saw Pakistan as a net-importing country allocate a significant portion of its budget to imports. This policy was exacerbated further by US sanctions, levied due to Pakistan’s development of nuclear power. Agitation spread across the populous Punjab region. Discontent was also boiling over in the Sindh and Baluchistan regions, culminating in the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. All of these significant events have truly shaped the populist urgencies endemic to contemporary Pakistani socio-economic life. The broad category of populism therefore necessarily presumes and looks to encompass political, social and religious agitation across this broad scape and history. Populism has been hewn in different manners by different actors due to this broad and reasonable contextual analysis (Hansen, 2018).

Populism itself necessarily finds form and content exceptionally varied in a nation as grand and as conflicted as Pakistan. It is important in that light to attempt to define the parameters studied in this essay. In their examination of populism in the United States, it is established that the term ‘populism’ has become a contentious political epithet, devoid of any ameliorative potentiality. It is defined as center-right protests movements that mobilize power to win directly from the people, as opposed to plural issues, mobilize power through approval ratings, focus group testing or the mass media, and as parents, as opposed to elites, that seek an entire national or ethnical identity that they feel has been marginalized and seek to include that identity within the nation-state (Avalos, 2018). Granato takes a more historically materialist thesis. The borders of Pakistan

were definitionally decided on after independence from British colonial rule and as such do not conform to self-evidently bounded or coherent ethnic or internal regions. These recourse on border disputes has been another seedbed of populist sensationalism. Discontent with the shift in food sovereignty is especially prominent and potent in agrarian economies such as Pakistan's.

Defining Populism

Populism is a political stance that is often debated and contested in political discourse. Populist movements call for the support of 'the people' against a perceived 'elite.' In addressing these tensions between the 'elite' and 'the people,' populism's complexity can best be understood through five interlinked core characteristics: 1) the people, 2) the leader(s), 3) counter-elite rhetoric, 4) representation, and 5) anti-pluralism. Arguably, populism is found on both the left and right. However, both scholars and the public often perceive populism as unworthy and threatening to democratic stability. In analyzing populism, it is also essential to recognize the social, political, and economic context in which it emerges. In acknowledging these complexities, over-simplistic understandings of populism as 'good' or 'bad' must be avoided (Gianolla, 2017). Populism is typically associated with key political figures and movements. The 45th President of the United States was elected on a platform that claimed to channel popular discontent. By invoking 'America First,' he pledged to return power to 'the people' and promised to fight 'corrupt' elites, fully resonating with the classic populist binary between 'the elite' and 'the people.' Furthermore, the administration swiftly set about implementing policies to restrict immigration, secure borders, and foster economic stability. But as with most populist initiatives around the globe, opinions on policy outcomes are polarized and divisions within society are exacerbated as demonstrated by evaluations of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (Avalos, 2018). Populism is difficult to define. Its meaning varies across political systems, languages, and cultures, making it a contentious term in political studies. Populism can emerge across nearly every ideological spectrum and can take almost any form. On one hand, populism may ignite democratic participation, giving voice to the disenfranchised. But on the other, depending on the form and degree, populism may curb rights, limit freedoms, and break norms, thus potentially destabilizing the liberal democratic order. And scopes of analysis must be consciously chosen based on chronology, geography, and particularly ideological background.

Populism and Political Parties

In comparison with bolstering populist rhetoric, political parties have their offices, organizational structures, and strategic outreach operations that uniquely distinguish them. Despite the appearance of certain parties that are more aligned to nationalistic principles in the Indian context, the PDM and its allied parties are manifested in a more flexible and more pluralistic manner. (White, 2023) Analysis herein refers to some of the key players in the spectrum including most notably the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as the three dominant national-level parties; and the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) and Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which have been major powerbrokers during coalition and minority settings of government. It is aimed to reveal the degree to which various political entities display alignment with the principles or the impacts of populism upon their ideologies, policies, and operations.

The utilization of party manifestos, key speeches, and public statements by party leadership, senior members, and representatives ensures that findings emanate from the dialogue and commitments of these groups rather than individual candidates, thereby illustrating how the strategies and messages imparted by this class affect various party structures. It is also important to examine the broader operational dynamics, structures, and impacts of populism, especially that which is orchestrated by the leadership of parties. Populist principles have been known to

accent the personal branding of leaders at the expense of the organisational processes of parties, which bear significant implications for sustaining and consolidating democratic stability (Rensmann et al., 2017).

Moreover, while political parties provide mechanisms for participation in democratic processes, historic and systemic struggles have often caused implications for the quality and competitiveness of democracy. Nevertheless, at the same time party structures and capabilities can offer buffers and sophisticated management of populist movements that emerge outside political structures (Gherghina & Jacquet, 2023). The way the strategies and functions of PTI, for example, have evolved since achieving power demonstrates how populist party structures can perpetuate sediments within democratic governance while in power. Such structures, for one, provide a sophisticated opposition to counteract mass movements that can challenge their governance.

Pakistan People's Party

The politics of Pakistan is replete with significances and peculiarities. Among the rank and file of political parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is historically known as the torch-bearer of this genre. Despite other political outfits claiming its space in the name of democratic struggle and popularity, major political parties always stand out due to their history, founding principles and public allegiance. (Murtaza et al.) The PPP has both contested and championed this spirit of social contract since its inception in 1967. On 30 November, 1967 in Lahore, Pakistan, contemporary political folklore was scripted as the PPP was formed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he emerged upon the political scene. The party's founding principles carried rhetoric to provide social justice to the exploited sections of society.

Active supporters and party quid pro quos consistently promoted socialism, public ownership, and mass empowerment, contrasting with traditional Pakistani politics. However, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 plunged the PPP into a crisis of identity and mobilization. Despite narratives claiming the party's decline since the end of Pressler's amendment in 1990, the PPP's survival depends on a new discourse to engage peasantry amid changing democratic mandates (Ali & Shahid, 2022). In three key provinces (Balochistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), the PPP's influence waned, yet it secured 40 to 45 seats in rural Sindh, benefiting from a loyal base of poor peasant voters attracted to Bhutto's principles. This relationship reflects the social contracts established since the 1970s, aligning with rural economic needs while posing questions about urban engagement strategies. The PPP's mix of traditional and modern narratives in the 1970s contrasts with the post-1988 era, where political and economic interests diverged, replaced by old patron-client traditions rather than genuine social pacts. (Baqir et al., 2023)

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf

On the eve of the 2018 General Elections, most of Pakistan continues to be at the mercy of poverty, inflation, unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure and public services, lack of access to essential utilities such as gas, water and electricity, and a host of other socio-economic issues. Curiously, this socio-economic spike coincided with a renewed wave of interest in the political theater. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), under the command of Imran Khan, used to be the faint and distant voice in Pakistan's echo chamber, but in 2018 it has become the nation's newest anthem. (Rehman et al., 2022) Despite almost unprecedented odds, PTI has been able to mobilize public opinion around its banner and come out on top in the historical General Elections of 2018, aspiring that change is imminent, Naya Pakistan has arrived. This subsection examines the rise of PTI as a contemporary populist force in Pakistan, and the challenges this may pose to democracy in the country.

'Age of PTI': Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), founded by Imran Khan in 1996, evolved from his political ambitions in 1992. The party's manifesto, centered on Ehsas, aims to reduce poverty and inequality. Over its 18-year journey, PTI has gained notable political experience, facing election losses until its 2018 success, driven by young voters attracted to Khan's vision. PTI effectively used social media, especially Twitter, to engage voters and spread its message, although the socio-economic factors behind its rise are often neglected. Globalization and right-wing trends have enabled populists, including PTI, to channel crises and anti-globalization sentiments in Pakistan. Its narrative focuses on combating corruption, radical reforms, and redistributing power from entrenched political dynasties, though the enduring influence of traditional parties poses challenges. PTI also supports smaller parties representing marginalized ethnic groups and advocates for inclusivity. Unlike India, it seeks peaceful regional relations, though its populist proposals may be impractical. PTI's distinct 10-point pre-electoral agenda sets realistic yet visionary expectations, with its victories potentially reshaping Pakistan's political dynamics through a lasting influence. (Zeynab Ali, 2011)

Muttahida Qaumi Movement

The rise of political populism in the developing world has become a major analytic preoccupation, largely due to its implications for democratic stability. While an early literature focused on populism through military regimes, current research looks at electoral paths for populist actors. Such studies have predominantly focused on Latin American, African, and South Asian cases. While a fruitful literature examines populism in terms of its relation to religious identities, far less work examines ethnic populism. Indeed a focus on ethnicity is largely limited to separatism and civil violence, as opposed to it playing a role in political party dynamics. To fill this gap, here the focus is on the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which offers a distinctive brand of populist politics rooted in ethnic identity. It offers a critique of the way in which the MQM has developed its political project, which has primarily appealed to the urban ethnic identity and insecurity of the city's Muhajir community. The MQM's political narrative has long revolved around notions of Muhajir ethnic identity and rights one articulated in an environment of a perception of underrepresentation, marginalization and victimization (Gianolla, 2017). A critical view of the MQM is offered following an explanation of the historical background of the party's emergence, its many transformations, from inception, to consolidation, to its current profile. Detail is presented in terms of how the MQM engaged with and sought to influence perceptions of key events to cultivate a significant and loyal voter-base.

This paper highlights the transformative role of leadership in shaping the party's populist appeal, particularly that of Altaf Hussain. It is noted how the party (and its leadership) has navigated a rapidly changing political landscape, and a legal and security environment that it has frequently viewed as inimical. An overview of the many significant challenges faced, and responses to them, are detailed. It is demonstrated that the intersection of ethnicity, populism and party politics in a highly polarized urban environment is of deep consequence for wider patterns of democratic governance in Pakistan.

Populism and Social Media

Paralleling a global trend in recent years, populism is on the rise in Pakistani politics. This kinship with the global rise of populist movements, particularly in the Global South, has been observed and discussed in the academic and public discourse around the recent state of populism in the country. While populism as a political style and strategy is not something new in Pakistani politics, its current revival in a period of profound socio-political changes is making both its supporters and detractors anxious (Yilmaz and Batool2025). This recent debate on populism has focused on analyzing the causes, forms, supporters and detractors, dynamics and consequences

of populist discourses in Pakistan. However, there is a notable gap in the issue: how populist politicians, particularly the populists in power, utilize social media to promote their populism and what impact social media has on it and on democratic stability.

Populism in Pakistan has its distinct features, forms, and causes, while still sharing a common structure with the global rise of populism. The ongoing “electoral protests” and “chosen government debilitation” staged by PTI, the ruling party, and the opposition parties’ newly emerged “multi-party alliance” to pursue a “long march” and a “train march” to oust the government are the manifestation of it. The circumstances around these forms of populism and counter-populism cause many to worry about the future of democratic stability in the country. They are debating the extent to which the current form of populism, by the populists and the counter-populists, allied with the declining traditional press, jeopardizes the already precarious democratic institutions and stability. (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023) In light of these concerns, exploring how populism and counter-populism navigate the social media landscape, which is still less edited and regulated compared to the traditional press and is the new battleground of political struggles in many developing countries, can provide new insights and implications to both academia and the public. (Baqir et al., 2023)

Economic Factors Driving Populism

As populism surges in contemporary politics, the economic reasons driving this trend need serious analytical examination as well. Correspondingly, this text seeks to identify the economic factors contributing to the emergence of populism in Pakistani politics, focusing on three key issues: the relationship between economic distress and populist sentiments; the various ways in which populist leaders politically exploit economic issues; and considering whether certain economic reforms might exacerbate populism or even facilitate it. Since 2008, as Pakistan faced its most serious economic challenges in the fifty years following independence, there was growing public discontent with traditional political elites who were seen as responsible for such economic mismanagement. (Sheikh et al.2022) As key economic indicators significantly deteriorated noteworthy among them the rise in poverty, unemployment, and inequality there was a concurrent rise in both traditional and social media platforms which employed anti-democratic and anti-elitist rhetorics that currently dominate public discourse.

Various economic events and policies intensified public grievances against traditional political elites in Pakistan. The in formalization of the economy and declining real wages before 2008 led to significant impoverishment of society. This period also experienced regressive taxation, worsening income inequality and social unrest. The Oil, Food, and Financial Crisis of 2008-09 caused widespread economic disruption, impacting developing nations like Pakistan. The International Monetary Fund imposed strict austerity measures for loans, which Pakistan rejected, unlike the European Union during its debt crisis. (Fazal et al., 2022) Populist leaders took advantage of economic uncertainty to gain support for nationalistic agendas, often using inflammatory language to target political opponents. The rise of populism varies greatly among nations; not all leaders can secure broad support. Some rely on political institutions, while others may resort to authoritarian methods like enhanced security to silence dissent. However, many populist figures are skilled politicians who adeptly manipulate parliamentary democracy for their interests.

In view of these widespread populist threats, many democracies are at a crossroads regarding what kind of economic approach to take. Events over the last decade also show that there is a quietly expanding stratum within emerging economies who arrogate to themselves the solipsistic task of championing the consistent preservation of current policies and institutions. A closer examination of the reasons for populism’s rise reveals a different pattern from the one

commonly disseminated in the financial press, including the view that populism is simply an irrational revolt of poor rural voters against their urban compatriots. (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022) In reality, there is a much more complex portrait developing which transcends traditional Left Right divides geographical representation points out to a preeminence in both development and de-industrialization.

The Role of Nationalism in Populism

Populism is now a global political phenomenon. Globalization, disillusion with traditional parties, more civil liberties, and rapid changes due to technology and communication are giving rise to populist movements across diverse world regions. Unlike previous movements, which emerged merely to speak for the unobtrusive and underprivileged, today's populism is visible, audible, and more primitively aggressive and uses modern technology to capture the opportunities of sudden or violent changes. This boldness might have dangerous consequences for new as well as prevailing systems in the world (Sheranova, 2018). In countries like Pakistan, where rulership structures are neither too tenacious nor too imbricated, the potential of populism to fill the vacuum created by disillusioned political nurtures is feared. Indian notions of populism have been supported by emotional politicians, actors, sportsmen, and other celebrities. New media operators aid this. The rivalry between democracy and dictatorship in World War II and its aftermath gave a tough time to populace and an early dim for populist rule in subcontinental politics. Indian populists aligned themselves with the Axis powers as democracies and so their mass movements were crushed by British populists. Some political observers tag populism in Pakistan as nationalism due to the comradeships between populists and nationalists. President Jinnah averted the partition of the Islamic League meticulously and lately, populist leaders like Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto pursued a unique narrative due to his failed connection with PPP-N and himself put the foundations of Pakistan. In homeland politics, military and non-military rulers worked on a united agenda based on a common threat narrative (Khan2023).

For instance, Gen (Retd) Musharraf utilized the Hindutva ideology principally to cement the loyalty of the masses with his government. Since the 21st century, imperatives of global politics have completely reshaped thick narrative of the discourse. In the changed security environment after 9/11 the imperatives of foreign policy of Pakistan have changed. New alignments had to be carved out in the background of regional conflicts. These imperatives are incongruent with the populist narrative of ethnic, political or any other sort of amalgamation on any issue. Instead, elements of nationalist expediencies harmonies fervently for these imperatives. (Qurban, 2024) Hence, a new broader narrative compatible with the imperative of foreign policy is devised by the stakeholders of the national power matrix and this situation can be of potential dangers for political stability.

Populism and Governance

Populism in Pakistan significantly impacts governance practices, prompting debate on its effect on public policy-making. Scholars and practitioners increasingly examine how populist styles influence institutional structures, decision-making, and the roles of trained bureaucrats. Despite a growing body of research, the interplay between knowledge production and the relevance of populism for governance remains underexplored. This chapter re-evaluates populism's impact on public policy, emphasizing its normative implications in both authoritarian contexts and emerging democracies. The analysis particularly focuses on Mexico, showcasing a notable case of populist governance. Over two decades, the relationship between populism and governance has been closely analyzed, often scrutinizing populist governments' effects on established political and administrative institutions. However, there has been less emphasis on how populist

leaders influence the decisions of autonomous public authorities, warranting further investigation into this crucial aspect. (I. Dussauge-Laguna, 2022)

Impact of Populism on Democratic Institutions

The rise of populism in Pakistan is both a response to and a cause of its political instability. Populism can offer a discontented public a neat and contemptuous political explanation for their disenchantment, as well as a clear, powerful and direct means to reverse it. The enshrinement of the voice of the masses as a social fact into political discourse, by its very nature, undermines the authority of representative democracy, often disseminating coups against professional politics and bureaucracy. The 'People' are usually presented as organized in a homogeneous block, giving rise to disputability over who is 'the Body Politic'. This logic goes hand-in-hand with erosion of checks and balances and their replacement with institutions based on direct popular sovereignty, whereby the central leader is the exclusive spokesman of the will of the people. An anti-institutional logic is thus inherently part of populism (I. Dussauge-Laguna, 2022).

In Pakistan, this problem is acute given the inherent weakness of democratic statecraft, also, and underlying this, the herd-like nature of its elections; this detracts from their probative force and exacerbates cries of rigging. Likewise pervasive disenfranchisement from the political process is usually presented as the elevated active, politically-engaged, portion of the electorate (often urban, educated youth) speaking for the inert remainder. This plurality is recast as extra-system, even imperialistic. The weaker local, district and court bodies of government are often (sometimes accurately) viewed as corrupt or ineffective, which imbues discussion of them with a depoliticized moralistic tone. Laws, especially those involving the armed forces, can be masked as a necessary measures for the greater good. In such an environment, there are manifold non-exclusive sites for contesting the legitimacy of democratic outcomes. Rather than declaring democracy as a winner, it will hopefully result in a more sceptical approach towards democratic practice in Pakistan, however, precious a commodity it is (Rensmann et al., 2017).

Challenges to Democratic Stability

Populism sells well against the backdrop of frustrated expectations, non-performance vis-à-vis long-held electoral promises, and general disillusionment with the speed and variety of governance mechanisms. This has recently been happening in a range of new democracies in South and East Asia and Latin America. It is particularly pertinent to ask what kind of political and policy agenda populism will promote in South Asia, especially, in a country like Pakistan. One of the key contributions of this special issue is to look at this less-considered dimension of the discussion on populism. By strategic maneuver, populists usually do not pay heed to critical voices and remain bent upon making the 'voice of the people' preeminent. As a consequence of extended unrests, Pakistan is currently ruled by a harsh coalition government; and populism becomes a convenient route to divert public attention from the failures of authoritarian governance. Thus, populism arrives with sweeping electoral mandates only to transmute the political Wrong in the name of the imaginarium of the Right, hence paving the path for threatening illiberal consequences and authoritarian governance at the expense of emboldening selected institutions especially the state judiciary. Thus, populist tendencies grow and democracy is threatened due to the overwhelming populist project (Rensmann et al., 2017).

Populists appropriate the political arena through discussing the popularization of politics. Policymaking and policy implementation have become very hard and political life is full of 'difficulties'. Just as the Trump-led recent government of the U.S. did, the Bhutto-Zardari shed light on the swamp when coming to power, emphasizing how deep the populist penetration and bloating has been in that ensemble. Africa is not inoculated from the rise of political newcomers

with their proponents touting them as engineers of fresh forms of politics even if malicious content seems to feature more openly in their artistically presentation.

Erosion of Civil Liberties

A contemporary concern with populist governance is the erosion of civil liberties and recent restrictions on freedom of speech, press, and assembly, seen not only in non-democratic societies but increasingly in countries like Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and the United States. Intolerant actions under populist leaders, justified by claims to maintain public order or moral purity, have politicized art and created an environment of fear. Political gains often overshadow civil liberties, leading to repression that intimidates opposing voices through public and private power. This crisis creates a perilous atmosphere where new, provocative rules can lead to widespread oppression, affecting rebellious intellectual property. Democratic elites must enforce targeted checks on extremist power and resist authoritarian attempts to undermine political dialogue and communication outlets. In Pakistan, the populist regime is curbing press freedom, prompting a unification of societal voices against these rules. The pursuit of freedom of expression is perilous and raises urgent questions, such as the disappearance of young literary enthusiasts. This ongoing case exemplifies how the erosion of civil liberties can harm the body politic, leading to a dangerous trajectory. (Rensmann et al., 2017)

Political Polarization

The rise of populism in Pakistani politics has led to significant political polarization, which intensifies societal divisions. This has been exacerbated by political leaders' rhetoric that pits 'the people' against 'the elite'. Political debates have become increasingly contentious, fostering hostility and distrust among different parties. This polarization undermines democratic stability and impacts governance, reducing compromise and collaboration among officials. Instead, political parties adopt a winner-takes-all approach, ignoring dissenting opinions (Sadiq, 2024). The PDP 2018 has further limited civil society's role, forcing political actors to achieve goals without its mediation, resulting in diminished open discourse and a toxic environment for advocacy. The ruling party's narrative portrays opposition figures as criminals while labeling the prime minister as a puppet implicated in rigged elections.

This rhetoric undermines healthy competition, leaving voters with few choices. Ordinary citizens are alienated from politics as negative views proliferate between rival factions. The recent general polls are widely perceived to be manipulated, intensifying polarization. Selective accountability, seen as an attempt to suppress dissent, highlights the lack of cooperation between parties on national issues. Political bickering is rampant, with leaders accusing each other of serious misdeeds, and supporters often believing their group's distorted narratives. Media from both sides focuses on party points rather than factual reporting. In this environment, feminist reports are dismissed as "Indian-paid anti-state agendas" or labeled as fabrications. (Zeynab Ali, 2011)

Judicial Independence

The exercise of judicial powers is vital for democracy, emphasizing independence, impartiality, and human rights as outlined in the Universal Charter of the Judge. However, populist governments are increasingly targeting the judiciary. Populist politicians, who often challenge independent institutions and justify their means, tend to seek control over the judiciary. Evidence from countries like Bangladesh and Turkey shows efforts to influence judicial decision-making (Barroso, 2021). In Pakistan, historical challenges to the judiciary, particularly during General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship (1977-1988) and Nawaz Sharif's era, highlight the impact of populism on judicial independence. The politicization of the judiciary reflects ongoing political conflicts, with the Supreme Court becoming more active post-2000, influenced by pressure from

lawyers and media. This shift raises questions about whether state terror has decreased or if the judiciary has merely become hyperactive. The non-political role of the judiciary is contentious, as higher court decisions increasingly lead to political crises that undermine democratic institutions. Judicial independence remains a critical concern. (Stopchinski, 2019)

Comparative Analysis with Other Countries

Populism has been a global buzzword in recent years in the context of democratic governance. This political idiom envisions an ideal people against a corrupt elite. This section critically interrogates the notion of populism by looking at some recent case studies from Pakistan alongside some historical and contemporary examples from different parts of the world. Global outbreak of the COVID-19 spun up a coterie of counterfactual theories in Pakistan about the virus and its prevention. This resonated well with the fundamental faiths of Pakistani populism: Anti-Intellectualism, Anti-Rationalism, and Anti-Science. Such populist positioning on the COVID-19 pandemic sums up the challenges that populism poses to the stability of democratic governance. This section purports to decenter the idea of populism by dwelling first on a brewing populism in Pakistani politics and then engaging with the applications and contestations of this term in different contexts. It remains an open-minded category, which encompasses various ideological families and is expressed in different discursive styles across both the Left-Right spectrum and varieties of socio-cultural hegemonies. Indeed, the features of populism in the global south apparently goes beyond some common characteristics with the western referents, like the mobilization of the 'forgotten masses' (Rensmann et al., 2017); the construction of a people' against the above, coupled with a strong leader; the covenant with the 'authentic culture' of the nation transferring on to the peril from its degeneration (K M, 2017); and a peculiar centrifugal relationship with the concept of democracy.

However, the political and historical background of each context may deeply shape the nature and meaning of the populist experience. To understand how it shapes and challenges democratic governance, populism should neither be seen as a uniform categorization nor a separate and unconditional category of the democratic. By looking at selected examples that stress the global dimensions of populism, it also aims to shed light on some other applications of the concept whose understanding is often contaminative, misleading, or misleading in itself.

Future of Populism in Pakistan

With the burgeoning literature on populism, this domestic political culture in Pakistan is bound to attract scholarly attention in the coming days. After a close examination of current phenomena, one can well argue that it would be challenging for populism to invade uncompromised local democracy in Pakistan. Nevertheless, accountability paradoxes in contemporary representative democracies suggest populism might become a serious test to democracy in Pakistan in the coming years. Is there a future of Pakistani populism, thereby challenging current democratic stability? Several factors might account for the future trajectory of populism in Pakistan.

These are threatening local democracy; soaring economic misery might encourage anti-establishment politics; fighting against corruption and inefficient governance might provoke contentious democracy; decreasing demand of liberal democracy would allow authoritarian yet populist practices; recurring membership in global populist networks might intensify the inwardly directed populism; with the death of influential top populists, this vigorous movement might revert. There is no denying that political leaders of the PTI and the PPP know the precariousness of negating procedural democracy, as the GIK and former military dictators legitimized anti-status quo political rhetoric by winning national elections (K M, 2017).

It might be particularly pertinent to ask about populist adaptation to changing public sentiment and political circumstance in Pakistan; new forms and expressions of populism might be linked to a wide variety of manifestations, particularly addressing climate change, the ethics of digital control, and global refugees. At the same time, one should inquire about the incumbents' response to the rising tide of populism; would they readily embrace it, institutionally consolidate their democratic framework, or stupidly fight back until the very end? Populism is unlikely to disappear any time soon (Baqir et al., 2023). If anything, it is quite possible that new kinds of populisms will emerge. One could also investigate here how these phenomena reshape conventional political parties and the ways in which they respond to demands advanced by populist agitators. It is imperative that such research be deepened and expanded, tapping the innovative potential to plunge the vast murky sea and rethink how to maintain the democracy that Pakistan sustains and conclude benefiting Afghans, especially for female citizens.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistani stability is under historic levels of stress. A civilian republic has completed its first-ever two full terms; simultaneously, society deals with a variety of structural issues it has never faced before. Economic hardship, civic uprising, and sectarian and inter-ethnic hostilities on the rise, in the backdrop a populist party has risen that is bent on overturning the existing political order. This group eschews political norms and conventions, especially in the realm of discourse, pitting itself against the entire political class, 'the Establishment,' and ultimately, the civilian state. Boisterously weaving conspiracies related to all three, it further fans existing hostilities. The combination creates extreme vicissitudes in the political, societal, and psychosocial environment. Aided by media, the lowest common denominators of the 'national soul' are stirred, manifesting in cycles of hope and despair, unity and division, joy and violence. The existing beleaguered space for civic reprisal and public dialogue diminishes further.

Despite certain rhetorical flourishes, attention to actual structural reform to the democratic chain remains negligible. The brunt has, once more, solely fallen on the shoulders of a flaccid, passive-aggressive, and structurally divided political class, rendering it all the more ineffectual, and thereby, the populace, an easy target against their beliefs in both their basic identity and rights (I. Dussauge-Laguna, 2022).

The following recommendations aim to strengthen Pakistani democracy and resilience against populist challenges. Electoral integrity has been severely damaged, eroding trust in democratic processes. Reforms are necessary to enhance transparency and oversight in elections, particularly due to PTI's disqualification tactics, a biased electoral commission, and declines in media freedom. Additionally, support for civil liberties and judicial independence is essential. Long-term legal framework support is crucial, alongside educational initiatives and reforms in the civil service to develop independent bureaucratic actors. A primary concern is the significant societal schisms affecting democracy, which lead to reduced civic freedoms, expression, and increased polarization. Censorship and violence have fostered fear and misinformation, weakening civil society through financial regulations and restrictions on political activities. A major flaw is the persistent lack of consensus over political practices, exploited by populism. It is vital to de-politicize fundamental issues, necessitating a multi-faceted approach that encourages collaboration among political parties through various policy tools.

Conclusion

Populist leaders assert that they possess the unique ability to regulate their countries in ways that transcend the typical boundaries established by conventional institutions, utilizing the appeal of popular confidence as their primary tool. They often express a clear rejection of state institutions that refuse to submit to various political pressures, and they adopt a range of

strategies that enable them to exert control over these institutions. The central aim of populists is to diminish the role of parliament and render it effectively immobile in responding to societal needs. Additionally, they launch attacks on the freedom of the press, manifesting a deep-seated hostility toward the media that can expose and challenge their narratives. By systematically discrediting political parties, populists strive to undermine the processes of institutionalization, which are crucial as political parties embody key values of alternation and moderation within governance. However, despite the populists' claims, political parties remain indispensable for the functioning of a democratic polity; without them, the idea of a functioning democracy would ultimately devolve into mere fiction.

The ongoing existence of political parties and a vibrant parliament is essential for facilitating political alternation, and thus, populists have resorted to no better strategy than to systematically discredit these entities through various actions or rhetorical discourse. There is an exceedingly high cost associated with steering public affairs in the absence of established, institutionalized political parties and systems; this high price becomes evident even if populism manages to temporarily postpone its reckoning with the integrity provided by these institutions. Societal plurality inherently constrains the populists' ability to provide mechanical representation to those who choose to vote for them, which inevitably leads to governance challenges. Without such plurality, what often arises are narrow parliamentary majorities and precarious governments that struggle to maintain stability. For more enduring and stable majorities to emerge, populists must engage in the delicate dance of forming alliances with other parties, which in turn broadens the democratic spectrum of representation. On the other end of the spectrum, far-right parties, which have frequently curtailed key defenses for democracy, have often demonstrated a desire to lead the country without relying on partnerships. Despite their seemingly fine electoral performances, historical evidence suggests that these parties have not successfully managed to assume the reins of government effectively.

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