Political Culture and the Dynamics of Populist Policy-Making: A South Asian Perspective

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ABSTRACT
The resurgence of populist politics in South Asia reflects deep-seated transformations in political culture, governance, and citizen-state relations. This study explores how distinctive cultural and historical patterns of political behavior have shaped the rise and policy orientations of populist leaders in the region, focusing on cases such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The research argues that populist policymaking in South Asia is not merely an outcome of global anti-elite sentiment but is deeply rooted in local traditions of charismatic authority, patron-client networks, and religious or nationalist symbolism. By integrating theories of political culture and populism, the study identifies how leaders such as Imran Khan, Narendra Modi, and Sheikh Hasina have leveraged cultural narratives of authenticity and moral renewal to consolidate power while weakening institutional checks and balances. The paper employs a qualitative and comparative approach, relying on secondary data from journal articles, policy documents, and historical sources. Findings suggest that populist governance in South Asia thrives where participatory political culture coexists with weak institutionalization, allowing leaders to frame themselves as the moral voice of the people. However, such dynamics also constrain democratic consolidation and policy coherence. The study contributes to the broader debate on how political culture mediates the global spread of populism and offers insights into developing context-sensitive governance reforms in South Asia's volatile democracies.
Keywords: Political Culture, Populism, South Asia, Democratic Governance, Political Leadership, Institutional Erosion

Introduction
Populism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary global politics, reshaping democracies across the world and challenging traditional notions of governance and representation. In South Asia a region marked by postcolonial state-building, complex ethnic compositions, and persistent socio-economic inequalities populism has assumed distinct cultural and political expressions. Unlike its Western counterparts, South Asian populism draws its strength not merely from anti-elitist discourse or economic discontent but from deeper cultural narratives of morality, nationalism, and religious legitimacy (Chatterjee, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2021). This dynamic interaction between political culture and populism has created what may be called a "cultural populism," where identity, symbolism, and collective emotions drive political behavior more than institutional performance or policy coherence.

The evolution of political culture in South Asia is inseparable from the region's colonial past and post-independence trajectories. Colonial legacies of hierarchical authority, paternalistic governance, and centralized power structures continue to shape citizen-state relations (Kaviraj, 2019). In countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, the struggle to balance democratic ideals with socio-religious and ethnic divisions has resulted in hybrid regimes that oscillate between democratic participation and authoritarian tendencies (Fair, 2022). Within these hybrid settings, populist leaders often emerge as charismatic saviors, mobilizing collective frustrations into personal mandates of transformation.

Political culture, as conceptualized by Almond and Verba (1963), refers to the set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that give meaning to political processes and institutions. In the South Asian context, this culture is highly participatory yet personalized, where citizens perceive politics through emotional and moral lenses rather than institutional mechanisms. This emotional orientation provides fertile ground for populist mobilization (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Leaders like Imran Khan in Pakistan and Narendra Modi in India have effectively utilized narratives of national revival and anti-corruption to tap into public disillusionment with traditional elites and bureaucratic inefficiency (Basu, 2020). Similarly, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh and Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka have invoked themes of moral integrity, nationalism, and cultural authenticity to legitimize strong executive rule.

Political Culture and Populist Leadership

Populism in South Asia cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-cultural foundations. The concept of "leader as redeemer" has historical roots in pre-modern traditions of kingship and spiritual leadership, where political authority was intertwined with moral virtue (Sayeed, 2018). Contemporary populist leaders have revived these notions by presenting themselves as guardians of the people's moral and cultural identity. This fusion of politics with morality and emotion differentiates South Asian populism from its Western forms, which are often driven by anti-immigration or anti-globalization rhetoric. Moreover, the communicative style of South Asian populists reflects the performative dimensions of political culture. Mass rallies, religious references, symbolic gestures, and direct appeals to the poor and marginalized constitute a populist vocabulary that transcends class and ethnicity (Jayal, 2021). Social media platforms have further amplified this performative populism, enabling leaders to bypass institutional channels and directly engage with citizens. The personalization of political communication reinforces the perception that leaders embody the collective will of the people.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Gap

Existing scholarship on populism largely draws from Western experiences, focusing on right-wing nationalism in Europe and the Americas (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). However, such frameworks often overlook the embedded cultural dimensions of populism in non-Western societies. While a growing body of literature examines the institutional and economic aspects of South Asian populism (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Acharya, 2021), relatively few studies explore how political culture shapes the formation, persistence, and policy behavior of populist governments. This gap calls for a culturally grounded analysis that connects local political traditions with contemporary populist discourse.

This study addresses this gap by examining how the political culture of South Asia marked by emotional mobilization, moral symbolism, and hierarchical social relations conditions the rise and policy behavior of populist regimes. It investigates how populist leaders utilize cultural narratives to frame policy priorities, manipulate democratic institutions, and sustain popular legitimacy despite governance shortcomings. By situating populism within the broader fabric of

South Asian political culture, the study offers a context-specific understanding of why populist movements in the region exhibit resilience and adaptability.

Objectives, Hypotheses, and Methodological Orientation

The central objective of this research is to analyze the reciprocal relationship between political culture and populist policy-making in South Asia. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine how cultural values, symbols, and historical legacies influence the rise and consolidation of populist leadership.
- Assess the implications of populist policymaking for democratic accountability and governance performance.
- Explore how populist regimes use cultural legitimacy to offset institutional weaknesses.

Based on these objectives, two hypotheses are advanced:

H1: Populist leadership in South Asia derives its legitimacy from culturally embedded narratives of morality, nationalism, and collective redemption rather than from institutional performance.

H2: The personalization of politics in South Asian cultures strengthens the durability of populist regimes by fostering emotional rather than procedural loyalty among citizens.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, drawing upon secondary data including journal articles, policy analyses, and historical accounts. The comparative design allows for identifying both commonalities and divergences among the populist experiences of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Content analysis of political speeches, media coverage, and policy documents is used to trace how cultural motifs are embedded in populist discourse. The interpretive lens of political culture theory guides the analysis, emphasizing the interplay between collective beliefs and political behavior.

Significance of the Study

The research contributes to three intersecting debates: (1) the cultural foundations of populism in non-Western democracies, (2) the resilience of populist regimes in hybrid political systems, and (3) the implications of personalized political culture for democratic consolidation. By linking political culture with policy dynamics, the study enhances understanding of how populism both reflects and reshapes the moral grammar of South Asian politics. It further highlights that the sustainability of populist rule depends not only on institutional manipulation but also on the leader's capacity to articulate a culturally resonant vision of political renewal.

In sum, this study situates populist policymaking within the broader socio-cultural context of South Asia, offering a nuanced interpretation of how political culture informs governance patterns and democratic trajectories. Through its culturally sensitive and comparative framework, it seeks to move beyond Eurocentric explanations of populism and illuminate the distinctive pathways through which South Asian societies negotiate authority, legitimacy, and change.

Literature Review / Theoretical Integration

Understanding Populism: Global Theoretical Perspectives

Populism, as a political phenomenon, has attracted extensive scholarly attention for its ability to challenge established democratic norms and institutional stability. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two antagonistic groups "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." This dichotomy provides populists with moral authority to claim exclusive representation of the people's will, often undermining institutional pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). Ernesto Laclau (2005) conceptualizes populism as a political logic rather than a fixed ideology, emphasizing the role of discourse and emotional resonance in constructing the "people" as a political subject. Similarly,

Weyland (2017) interprets populism as a strategy through which leaders seek personal power by directly appealing to unmediated support from mass constituencies.

While Western scholarship has largely analyzed populism through institutional, economic, or ideological lenses, scholars such as Taggart (2004) and Pappas (2019) highlight its "cultural turn," suggesting that populism draws heavily from collective identity and shared symbolic narratives. This cultural dimension is particularly salient in South Asia, where emotional appeals, historical memories, and religious symbolism dominate political discourse. Populist leaders in the region often blend nationalism, spirituality, and anti-elitism, constructing a hybrid form of governance that merges traditional authority with modern populist tactics (Vanaik, 2020).

Political Culture as a Theoretical Framework

The concept of political culture provides a critical framework for understanding why populism assumes unique forms across societies. Almond and Verba's (1963) seminal work *The Civic Culture* defines political culture as the collection of orientations cognitive, affective, and evaluative that individuals hold toward their political system. In societies where emotional and moral orientations dominate, political decisions tend to be influenced by personal trust and symbolic legitimacy rather than institutional procedures (Inglehart, 1997).

In the South Asian context, political culture is marked by hierarchical authority, personal loyalty, and collective moralism (Kaviraj, 2019). These traits create fertile ground for populism by enabling leaders to embody moral virtue and claim to speak for the authentic people. The "moral populism" of South Asia differs from Western populism in that it is not merely anti-elitist but also culturally restorative seeking to revive an imagined moral order disrupted by globalization or corruption (Chatterjee, 2020).

Scholars like Shils (1956) and Geertz (1973) emphasize that political legitimacy in traditional societies is derived from cultural norms rather than legal-rational institutions. Applying this insight to South Asia, populist leaders often merge modern democratic rhetoric with cultural idioms of faith, sacrifice, and community. This fusion creates a "cultural populism" where governance decisions are framed as moral acts rather than technocratic choices (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Populism in South Asia: Contextual Dimensions

India

India presents one of the most prominent examples of culturally embedded populism. Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014 reflected the synthesis of Hindu nationalism with populist rhetoric centered on anti-elitism, moral purity, and national rejuvenation (Jaffrelot, 2019). Scholars note that Modi's political appeal rests on his ability to present himself as an ascetic, self-made man who embodies the spiritual aspirations of the Hindu majority (Chacko, 2018). This alignment between cultural identity and political mobilization transforms populism into a moral crusade.

Under Modi, populist policymaking has often prioritized symbolic initiatives such as the "Swachh Bharat" (Clean India) campaign or the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir over structural reforms (Basu, 2020). These policies appeal emotionally to collective pride and nationalism, reinforcing the image of a decisive leader restoring India's moral order. The personalization of governance and centralization of authority under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) illustrate how populism thrives in India's participatory yet hierarchical political culture (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

Pakistan

In Pakistan, Imran Khan's populism draws upon Islamic moralism and anti-corruption narratives. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) positioned itself as a movement for "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan), portraying him as a pious reformer combating a morally bankrupt elite (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022). His populism is rooted in the political culture of emotional mobilization and personal trust rather than programmatic policy (Ahmed, 2021).

Khan's rhetoric against "mafias" and "dynastic politicians" resonated deeply with citizens disillusioned by elite patronage systems (Fair, 2022). Yet, his governance revealed the contradictions of moral populism emphasizing virtue while undermining institutional checks and opposition autonomy. Scholars argue that Pakistani populism perpetuates political instability by reinforcing the "savior syndrome," where citizens rely on charismatic individuals rather than institutional accountability (Sayeed, 2018).

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's populist politics revolves around dynastic leadership and nationalist moralism. Sheikh Hasina's long tenure illustrates a unique hybrid of populist paternalism and authoritarian control (Riaz, 2021). Her regime's populist legitimacy stems from invoking the Liberation War legacy, framing dissent as betrayal of national values. This emotional framing consolidates support among rural and lower-middle classes, despite shrinking democratic space (Hossain, 2020).

Unlike Modi and Khan, Hasina's populism relies more on historical continuity than moral redemption. Yet, the underlying mechanism remains similar personalized authority embedded in emotional loyalty. The political culture of Bangladesh, characterized by patronage networks and collective identification with national heroes, perpetuates a cyclical dependence on populist leadership (Riaz, 2023).

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka offers another critical case where populism intersects with ethnic nationalism. The Rajapaksa family's dominance is built on Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and a populist promise of protecting the majority community against internal and external threats (Uyangoda, 2020). Mahinda Rajapaksa's post-war populism blended militarized nationalism with welfare populism, legitimizing authoritarian consolidation (Venugopal, 2018).

This form of populism exploits political culture's moral binaries defenders of the nation versus traitors. Even after economic collapse and public protests in 2022, the persistence of Rajapaksa-style populism underscores how deeply cultural and emotional attachments sustain populist legitimacy (DeVotta, 2022).

Cultural Populism and Policy Dynamics

Political culture not only explains the rise of populist leaders but also shapes their policy styles. Populist regimes in South Asia often adopt policies that prioritize visibility over viability. Subsidy programs, symbolic welfare schemes, and high-profile national projects serve as performative demonstrations of leadership commitment (Jayal, 2021). Such policies reflect a "moral economy of populism," where leaders redistribute symbolic recognition rather than material wealth (Kumar, 2019).

At the same time, populist policymaking is constrained by the same political culture that sustains it. Emotional loyalty discourages institutional accountability, leading to ad-hoc governance and policy volatility (Riaz, 2023). Populist regimes also face difficulty sustaining public trust once moral narratives lose resonance or when economic performance declines. For instance, Imran Khan's fall from power in 2022 illustrates how moral populism can erode when confronted by pragmatic governance challenges (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022).

Populism, Democracy, and Institutional Erosion

One of the major consequences of populist policymaking in South Asia is the erosion of institutional autonomy. Populist leaders often frame institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, or media as obstacles to the people's will, justifying executive dominance (Mounk, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly visible in India's politicization of civil institutions and Pakistan's weakening of parliamentary oversight (Chacko, 2018; Ahmed, 2021).

Furthermore, populist regimes instrumentalize democratic participation by mobilizing emotional legitimacy rather than fostering deliberative engagement. As Pappas (2019) argues, populism represents a form of "illiberal democracy," where electoral legitimacy coexists with majoritarian intolerance. In South Asia, where political culture prizes loyalty and morality, this illiberalism is often normalized as patriotic duty (Chatterjee, 2020).

However, some scholars suggest that populism may also have democratizing potential by mobilizing marginalized voices and challenging entrenched elites (Hawkins, 2020). In the South Asian case, populism has indeed broadened participation but at the cost of institutional stability and policy consistency. Thus, populism emerges as both a symptom and a driver of democratic fragility.

Integrative Theoretical Insights

Synthesizing these perspectives, this study argues that South Asian populism represents a culturally embedded form of governance that intertwines moral narratives, emotional mobilization, and personalized authority. The interaction between political culture and populism produces a cyclical pattern: moral appeals generate mass support, populist leaders centralize power, institutions weaken, and emotional legitimacy replaces accountability. By applying political culture theory, the analysis moves beyond structural explanations and situates populism within the lived moral universe of South Asian societies. This framework provides an interpretive lens to understand why populism endures despite governance failures because it resonates with deep-rooted cultural expectations of virtuous leadership and collective redemption.

Results and Discussion

Interlinking Political Culture and Populist Governance

The findings reveal that the endurance and appeal of populist regimes in South Asia are deeply conditioned by cultural, moral, and historical undercurrents that shape the region's political behavior. Populist leaders succeed in this environment because they align their discourse with culturally resonant narratives of virtue, sacrifice, and national renewal. The study identifies that the interplay between political culture and populism is neither accidental nor transient but structural rooted in long-standing traditions of personalized authority and emotional politics (Kaviraj, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021).

Analysis across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka demonstrates a consistent pattern: populist leaders translate moral and cultural ideals into political strategies. They embody familiar archetypes redeemers, protectors, or moral guardians who claim to restore authenticity against corrupt elites. This personalization of authority transforms democratic representation into emotional allegiance, blurring the boundary between people and leader (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The findings confirm the first hypothesis (H1) that legitimacy in South Asian populism is derived primarily from moral-cultural narratives rather than institutional performance.

Furthermore, the results support the second hypothesis (H2) that political culture's emphasis on emotional connection and communal belonging fosters loyalty that transcends procedural democracy. In Pakistan, for instance, Imran Khan's popularity endured despite economic

decline and institutional confrontation because his image as a morally upright reformer resonated with collective frustration against corruption (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022). Similarly, in India, Modi's symbolic politics manifested in temple inaugurations, welfare rituals, and patriotic campaigns converts governance into a sacred duty, securing moral legitimacy even amid rising inequality (Basu, 2020).

Patterns of Populist Policy-Making

The comparative evidence reveals three dominant policy patterns across South Asian populist regimes:

1. **Symbolic Policy Performance** Populist leaders prioritize visible, emotionally charged policies that symbolize national strength or moral renewal. Examples include Modi's demonetization campaign, Khan's anti-corruption drives, and Rajapaksa's "war hero" welfare schemes. These actions are designed not merely for economic or administrative outcomes but for reaffirming moral narratives of purification and redemption (Chacko, 2018; Venugopal, 2018).

2. **Centralization of Executive Authority** Populist governments often bypass institutional channels to project decisiveness. This personalization leads to an erosion of bureaucratic independence and the politicization of institutions such as the judiciary and civil service (Mounk, 2018). In Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina's administration illustrates how populist legitimacy can coexist with authoritarian centralization, justified as necessary for protecting the nation's moral fabric (Riaz, 2021).

3. **Moralized Redistribution** Rather than technocratic welfare systems, populist regimes employ moralized redistributive policies that link material benefits with symbolic loyalty. The poor are positioned as the virtuous "true people," deserving protection and patronage. Welfare populism in Sri Lanka and Pakistan exemplifies this blend of charity and control (Fair, 2022; DeVotta, 2022).

These patterns underscore that policy decisions under populism function as political theatre performed to reinforce cultural values and collective identity rather than optimize economic or administrative efficiency.

Emotional Legitimacy and Institutional Fragility

A crucial insight emerging from this study is the paradox of emotional legitimacy. Populist leaders derive immense strength from emotional bonds with citizens, but this same reliance undermines institutional trust. When governance is framed as a moral mission, dissent becomes moral betrayal, and institutions are seen as obstacles to the people's will (Pappas, 2019). Consequently, institutional checks and balances weaken, producing a vicious cycle of leader-centric politics.

For instance, in India, the BJP's populist discourse frequently frames critics as "anti-national," effectively delegitimizing opposition as moral corruption (Jaffrelot, 2019). In Pakistan, Khan's anti-elite rhetoric polarized society into "patriots" versus "traitors," narrowing the space for political compromise (Ahmed, 2021). In both cases, populism converts democratic pluralism into moral dualism a political culture that prizes loyalty over deliberation.

This erosion of institutional legitimacy is particularly concerning for South Asia's fragile democracies, where constitutional checks remain young. The study finds that populist regimes often leave lasting institutional damage even after electoral defeat, as bureaucracies become politicized and civil liberties curtailed (Chatterjee, 2020). Hence, political culture not only enables populism but also perpetuates its legacy beyond individual leaders.

Populism and Democratic Accountability

Despite their moral appeal, populist regimes frequently exhibit declining accountability once in power. Their reliance on direct emotional engagement discourages institutional mediation. Citizens begin to equate loyalty to the leader with patriotism, weakening civic oversight (Hawkins, 2020). For instance, Modi's "New India" narrative and Khan's "Riyasat-e-Madina" rhetoric transformed citizens into moral participants in a collective mission rather than critical evaluators of governance (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022).

This fusion of emotional identity with political allegiance limits policy critique. The study notes that bureaucratic expertise, judicial independence, and media autonomy decline under populist regimes because these are portrayed as elitist obstructions (Mounk, 2018). Such developments deepen democratic backsliding, confirming the view that populism in South Asia thrives where participatory culture coexists with weak institutionalization (Jayal, 2021).

Populist Economics: Between Moral Appeal and Structural Limitations

Economically, populist policymaking in South Asia tends to emphasize short-term moral victories over long-term structural reforms. Welfare schemes, subsidies, and infrastructure megaprojects often serve to symbolize compassion and decisiveness rather than sustainable planning (Kumar, 2019). This aligns with the political culture's preference for visible acts of benevolence rather than abstract policy outcomes.

However, these symbolic gestures rarely translate into economic stability. In Pakistan, populist fiscal mismanagement under PTI led to rising inflation, undermining the moral legitimacy that sustained Khan's popularity (Ahmed, 2021). In Sri Lanka, Rajapaksa's populist tax cuts and welfare promises contributed to the 2022 economic collapse (DeVotta, 2022). These examples reveal the structural contradiction of moral populism: it mobilizes support effectively but struggles to sustain governance credibility in the face of economic realities.

Cultural Continuity and Populist Resilience

The resilience of populism in South Asia is largely due to its cultural continuity. Even when populist leaders lose office, the emotional and symbolic templates they establish persist in the political imagination. Political culture, thus, reproduces populist tendencies by normalizing the expectation of charismatic, morally pure leadership (Sayeed, 2018).

The study's comparative analysis shows that in all four countries, populism evolves through adaptation rather than disappearance. In India, Modi institutionalized cultural nationalism into the state apparatus. In Bangladesh, populist moralism morphed into developmental authoritarianism. In Pakistan, post-Khan opposition parties replicate populist rhetoric to reclaim legitimacy. And in Sri Lanka, even after Rajapaksa's downfall, political discourse remains framed by moral-nationalist tropes (Riaz, 2023).

These findings suggest that populism in South Asia is not a temporary deviation from democracy but an enduring mode of governance deeply embedded in the region's political culture. The cyclical re-emergence of populism reflects a shared collective desire for moral purification and strong leadership amid chronic institutional inefficacy.

Implications for Democratic Governance

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, addressing populism in South Asia requires engaging with the cultural and moral dimensions of politics rather than merely institutional reform. Efforts to strengthen democracy must acknowledge that citizens' expectations are emotionally and morally charged. Democratic institutions must therefore cultivate moral credibility and responsiveness to compete with populist charisma (Inglehart, 1997).

Second, the study highlights that democratization strategies focusing solely on procedural aspects elections, checks, and constitutions may fall short unless they transform the underlying political culture. Building civic education, participatory local governance, and inclusive media

discourse can help shift political culture from emotional loyalty to rational accountability (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

In essence, political culture both enables and constrains populism. Its moral resonance sustains populist leaders, while its hierarchical tendencies limit institutional consolidation. Addressing this paradox requires a long-term cultural reorientation of political participation in South Asia.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers a comprehensive qualitative analysis, it acknowledges several limitations. The reliance on secondary data and interpretive analysis may constrain empirical precision. Future research could incorporate survey-based data on citizens' political attitudes to quantitatively test the relationship between cultural values and populist support. Moreover, expanding case studies to include Nepal and the Maldives could enrich comparative insights into smaller South Asian democracies.

Additionally, future scholarship should explore how transnational digital networks shape the new wave of populist mobilization. As social media increasingly mediates emotional and symbolic communication, understanding its cultural effects will be vital for assessing the evolution of populist policymaking in the region.

Synthesis

In summary, the study finds that South Asian populism is a culturally grounded phenomenon characterized by moral legitimacy, emotional mobilization, and personalistic authority. The enduring interaction between political culture and populism reinforces a cycle of emotional governance and institutional fragility. Populist leaders succeed because they translate collective moral anxieties into political narratives, offering redemption rather than reform. This dynamic reflects both the vitality and vulnerability of South Asian democracies vital because they resonate with the people's moral imagination, vulnerable because they substitute emotion for accountability.

Thus, populism in South Asia represents not the failure of democracy but its cultural reconfiguration, where moral authority replaces institutional legitimacy and emotional belonging supersedes civic rationality. Understanding this interplay is crucial for reimagining democratic renewal in one of the world's most politically vibrant yet institutionally fragile regions.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the rise and resilience of populist policy-making in South Asia are deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural legacies of political behavior. Populism in the region thrives within a context of personalized authority, collective emotional identification, and moralized political discourse. These cultural tendencies amplify populism's appeal by framing political leadership as a moral and patriotic mission rather than an institutional duty (Chatterjee, 2021; Varshney, 2019). The comparative analysis across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka reveals three central dynamics: the cultural legitimation of leadership, populist distortion of institutions, and the strategic manipulation of democratic norms.

Cultural Legitimation of Leadership

In South Asia, populist leaders have consistently employed culturally embedded narratives of authenticity and moral renewal to justify their authority. For example, Imran Khan's rhetoric of *Riyasat-e-Madina* in Pakistan, Modi's invocation of Hindu civilizational revival in India, and Sheikh Hasina's nationalist development discourse in Bangladesh all demonstrate the use of cultural idioms to create legitimacy beyond institutional mechanisms (Jaffrelot, 2021; Fair, 2018; Riaz, 2020). These narratives exploit the emotive dimensions of political culture,

particularly the mass desire for collective identity and redemption. The result is a fusion of populism and nationalism that elevates personal authority over bureaucratic governance. This finding aligns with Inglehart and Norris's (2019) theory that cultural backlash drives populism where traditional values face the pressures of modernization.

Populist Distortion of Institutions

The study finds that while populist leaders in South Asia initially mobilize under the banner of anti-elitism and moral renewal, they often consolidate control through the erosion of institutional independence. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has systematically centralized power and redefined secular institutions to reflect majoritarian preferences (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Similarly, Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government used anti-corruption campaigns selectively to delegitimize opposition forces while undermining judicial autonomy (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2022). In Bangladesh, Hasina's regime demonstrates an authoritarian-populist hybrid where electoral legitimacy coexists with suppression of dissent (Riaz, 2019). These examples illustrate that political culture rooted in deference to authority and emotional mobilization enables populists to reinterpret democratic norms without overtly dismantling them. Consequently, South Asian populism operates within "hybrid democracies" that maintain procedural democracy but erode substantive pluralism (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Economic Populism and Policy Outcomes

The study also reveals that populist policymaking in South Asia reflects an attempt to reconcile mass welfare expectations with fiscal and structural constraints. Economic populism manifested through cash transfers, subsidies, and mega-infrastructure projects serves as both a tool of legitimation and a means to sustain clientelistic networks (Aneez & Samarajiva, 2020). Modi's welfare populism through schemes like *PM-KISAN* and *Ujjwala Yojana*, Khan's *Ehsaas Program*, and Hasina's rural development programs exemplify the economic personalization of public policy. However, these initiatives often lack institutional continuity, leading to inconsistent outcomes and fiscal imbalances (Sadiq, 2021). The research confirms that populist economic policies in the region are culturally mediated performances of benevolent leadership rather than sustainable developmental strategies.

Populism, Media, and Digital Mobilization

A notable trend is the integration of digital platforms into South Asia's populist repertoire. Populist leaders have skillfully adapted social media to bypass traditional mediators and cultivate direct emotional connections with citizens. Modi's use of *Mann Ki Baat*, Khan's live Twitter engagements, and Hasina's digital governance campaigns exemplify this mediated populism (Chakravartty & Roy, 2019). The blending of technology and charisma enhances populist personalization while eroding deliberative communication. This supports Mudde's (2019) argument that populism transforms media into instruments of performative democracy rather than accountability.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests a feedback relationship between political culture and populism. While deep-rooted patterns of emotionalism, religious symbolism, and paternalistic authority nurture populist tendencies, populism in turn reinforces these traits by rewarding loyalty over deliberation and ideology. In Pakistan, the reverence for charismatic saviors perpetuates political volatility; in India, majoritarian populism redefines civic nationalism; in Bangladesh, dynastic populism blurs lines between state and party. This cyclical relationship ensures that populism remains embedded in the region's political DNA.

From a governance perspective, the study finds that populist policy-making undermines institutional checks while retaining a façade of democratic legitimacy. The weakening of

judiciary, media, and opposition parties fosters "delegative democracy" (O'Donnell, 1994), where leaders claim to embody the will of the people while bypassing constraints. Yet, the persistence of elections and public mobilization suggests that South Asia's democracies, though fragile, remain resilient through societal pluralism and periodic institutional pushback.

The study acknowledges certain limitations. The qualitative approach relies on secondary sources, which may not fully capture evolving political realities or subnational variations. Moreover, while it identifies broad regional patterns, the unique historical trajectories of each country warrant deeper case-specific research. Nonetheless, by integrating cultural analysis into the study of populism, this paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding why populist movements endure even amid policy failures and institutional decay.

Overall, the results indicate that South Asian populism is not an imported political phenomenon but a culturally adaptive mode of governance rooted in historical legacies of authority and identity. The region's political culture sustains populist leadership styles that emphasize moral charisma and emotional representation over institutional accountability. While such governance provides short-term legitimacy and mass appeal, it poses long-term risks for democratic consolidation and effective policymaking. The study thus calls for future research that links political culture with institutional reform to mitigate the populist cycle and foster more accountable governance in South Asia.

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