



Populism and Pakistani Politics in the Post Musharraf Era 2008-2023

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complex landscape of populism in Pakistani politics during the post-Musharraf era, spanning from 2008 to 2023. Beginning with a theoretical exposition of populism, the study examines the core principles and characteristics that define this political phenomenon. It dissects the various types of populism, highlighting the diverse approaches employed by leaders and movements to mobilize support. The historical context of populism in Pakistan is explored, shedding light on the country's flirtations with populist leaders and movements over the years. A particular focus is placed on religious populism within the nation, examining how religious leaders have harnessed populist sentiments for political influence. In the post-Musharraf period, a significant shift in the political landscape is analyzed, revealing the emergence of new populist figures and movements. This section explores how populism has adapted to the evolving socio-political dynamics in Pakistan, especially in the realms of governance, opposition, and public sentiment. Through a comprehensive exploration of these themes, this study offers valuable insights into the ever-evolving world of populism within Pakistan's political sphere, highlighting its significance and impact on the nation's democratic processes and governance.

Keywords: populism, Pakistan, politics

1. Introduction

The political organization is established to strive for granting better service delivery system which is also known as social welfare constitutionalism. But the lack of interest of the political organization into the social welfare led to contemporary populism (Demertzis, 2019). The domestic politics became so static that it froze the political system with limited chances of flexibility due to the indifferent attitude of the political elite. This led to phenomenon of populism which tried to change the existing socio-political setup by arousing the civil community through their desired manifestos (Tushnet, 2019). There are different triggers which led to establish the populism. For example, the political elites were found to be engaged with corrupt practices. Over the period of time, the statistics showed that they performed little for the national developments but their personal monetary assets grew marvelously. On the other hand, such political elite also employed the political power for the personal gains which is again ethically wrong. They directly engaged with the regional and global trade organizations and granted more benefits to their close ones and neglected the equal approach of social welfare (Gidron & Bart, 2013).

Political elite also paved away the equal economic system and promoted the economic inequality, which is contrary to their promises (Jaffrelot & Louise, 2017). All of their commitments which they made before the public proved false and could not prosper the material well-being of the masses. Hence, the bad governance or poor performance of the political elites, which provide a way for an emerging political power to take on the same responsibilities on whom the masses rely (Tushnet, 2019), mainly drives the political populism.

1.1. Theoretical exposition of Populism

Populism is a vague concept which does not have a proper defining rather it varies from author to author. For example, Mouffe (2016) stated that "Populism is not an ideology or a political regime and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content". Accordingly, populism is a collective action which aims to take power to accomplish the political tasks in better way.

Populism is a political way which may take different forms depending on the eras and places. When the people are fed up with the existing political structure, they strive for the better options. Under such circumstances, normally a new political organization under the leadership of a charismatic political leader steps forward and motivates the masses to lead them to the right way (Mouffe, 2005). The idea of populism is closely associated with democracy. Democratic political system is largely popular among the countries in the contemporary period (Derrida, 1988). It is committed to establish an equal social, economic and political system but there is difference between theory and practice because the democratic political setups are also not performing according the democratic values. In the absence of democratic performance, the popular will is raised which is known as populism (Arditi, 2007).

Populism also has relation with democracy because it is based on a political system closely linked with democratic process. Democracy is a system which believes to establish a government system based on the popular will through the direct votes. The same is concern associated with populism where popular vote is casted through referendum and plebiscite (Moffitt, 2016). The major difference between populism and democracy is related with the poor performance of parliament which is replaced with popular leader. The major aim of populism is to grant more services to the people based on meritocracy (Norris, 1997).

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Through the regular inadequate political practices, there is created a gap between the common people and the political elites. The political elites segregate themselves from the common people because they consider themselves superior than the ordinary society so in order to get rid of such political services, the wave of populism is initiated. In such circumstances, generally it is assumed that populism is the only solution of such political chaos, internal and external problems, immigration and other concerned areas (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

Populism is not an autocratic or self-made political system rather more than like democratic setup as the leadership is elected through the democratic system of direct votes. The leadership has the main role in populism because he/she motivates the people to stand and raise their voices against the tyranny policies of the political elites. The leadership highlights the corruption of the political which arouse the common people through political awareness. Media especially the social media chiefly adopted by the leadership to promote its political manifesto among the civil society (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Populism is nothing without the nomination of the main leadership. All of the policies and initiatives are encircled around the leadership. It sets the political trends in the society through pointing out the undemocratic means had been adopted by the pervious political leadership (Laclau, 2005). In the light of the above explanation, it is found that populism clearly opposes the idea of political elitism, aristocracy and plutocracy and strives to establish a political system based on popular will. The popular will in the sense of actual populism not like the democracy of the mere name.

1.2. Types of Populism

Populism is not a recent phenomenon rather it established soon after the malpractices of the democratic governments. Throughout the history, different initiatives have been taken regarding the popular political culture. Populism is an abstract concept which divided into different types. Following are prominent types of populism.

- Agrarian populism
- Reactionary populism
- Populist democracy
- Populist socialism

1.2.1. Agrarian Populism

As the name depicts that this type of populism is linked with the agrarian movements. The agrarian populism refers to the populist movements led by the farmers and their allies. Along with the farmers, the labor unions were also part of such populism. The agrarian populism notably started during the 19th century. The prominent examples of agrarian populism include the Narodniks in Russia and Populist Party of USA. The objective of agrarian populism is to oppose the exploiting policies and laws against the farmers and unions related to agrarianism because through such unjust policies and laws the people in power gain more advantages than the farmers and workers who actually work hard.

1.2.2. Reactionary Populism

Reactionary populism is intended to reverse the political changes. Reactionary is an individual (a popular political leader) who is committed to restore the society in the pervious state which was according to the demands of the people but later it had been undermined by the political elitism. The reactionary populism is perceived mainly in the right-wing-populism which is synonymous with radical rights. The reactionary populism is linked with anti-immigration and extreme nationalism policies. The steps taken by ex-US President Donald Trump are also taken in the reactionary populism (Tatic, 2017). Reactionary populism is also associated with nostalgia because it aims to gain the previous state which is considered comparatively better than the present society.

1.2.3. Populist Democracy

Populist democracy refers to engage and mobilize the people to take part in the political setup. The objective of populist democracy is to enhance the political awareness in the civil society so that they may choose their suitable candidates. Under this type of populism, the more efforts are made to register the votes and also to hold referendum (Takis, 2014).

1.2.4. Populist Socialism

Populist socialism or socialist populism is more left-wing populism. This type of populism strongly opposes the capitalism and favors of socialism or communism. Populist socialism is more traditional or orthodox approach which is inclined towards the collective ideas known as socialism. Populist socialism possess both dark and progressive aspects. It depends on the actors working on behalf of populist socialism either they take it in accordance to progressive or darks sides.

1.3. Approaches to the study of populism

Study of populism is often based on multiple approaches as delineated by key theorist. Following are some key approaches to the study of populism.

1.4. LacLauan Approach

The Laclauan approach to populism is rooted in the work of the Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau. This approach emphasizes the role of discourse and political rhetoric in the construction of populist movements. It suggests that populism emerges when a charismatic leader or movement successfully constructs a political identity that unites diverse social demands into a single, antagonistic "people" pitted against an "establishment" or "enemy."

1.5. Socio-Economic Approach

The socio-economic approach to populism focuses on the economic dimensions of populist movements. It emphasizes the grievances of economically disadvantaged or marginalized groups and their demands for economic justice. Socio-economic populism often involves calls for wealth redistribution, protection of workers' rights, and resistance to economic inequality.

1.6. Folkloric Approach

The folkloric approach to populism emphasizes the use of cultural symbols, traditions, and myths to construct a sense of collective identity among a specific nation or community. Leaders or movements employing this approach often invoke historical narratives and cultural elements to create a strong emotional connection with their followers.

1.7. Ideational Approach

The ideational approach to populism examines the ideological foundations and ideas that underlie populist movements. It emphasizes the role of political ideas, discourse, and ideologies in shaping populist narratives. This approach explores how populism can be driven by both left wing and right-wing ideological elements.

2. History of Populism in Pakistan

When it comes to the perspective of Pakistan, there are also many characters who became popular in the religion-political spheres. Normally Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto is named as the most popular leader in the history of Pakistan but history of Pakistan starts from 1947 not 1971. Therefore, before the Bhutto there were also some popular leaders from the East Pakistan as well. The first populist leader in the history of Pakistan was A. K. Fazal Haq. He was popular leader even before the partition period because he had been prime minister of Bengal twice. After the partition, he rose as the populist leader who got fame due to his anti-elite campaign not only against the Muslim landlords but also the Hindus as well.

Maulana Bhashani was another populist from East Pakistan. He also raised his voice against the feudalism and elitism in the Pakistan politics. He also motivated the masses to put pressure on the authoritarianism in the politics through their collective voices. His populist approach falls under the agrarian populism because he mainly targeted the Bengali peasants because the poor peasants were oppressed by the policies of political elites.

After Bhashani, Fatima Jinnah rose as the most popular leader in both the east and west Pakistan. Being the sister of Jinnah, she was equally popular among the people of both eastern and western Pakistan. Her voice is also considered important because she challenged the authoritarian rule of Ayyub Khan. Although she could not win the elections against Ayyub Khan but she was the most populist leader during sixties in both wings of Pakistan.

3. Religious Populism in Pakistan

In the case of Pakistan, religious populism is much popular because Pakistan is perhaps the only country in the modern nation-state system which came into being in the name of religion (Islam) (Denoeux, 2002). The freedom movement was largely motivated to gain better socio-economic opportunities for the Muslims of this region because the domination of the Hindus put certain restrictions on the worship. This is why, the religious scholars also participated in the freedom movement of Pakistan and it was aimed to establish Pakistan truly in the basis of Islamic Principles.

Islam is the second largest religion of the contemporary world. The movement of Islamism/Islamization started since the promulgation of Objective Resolution (OR). The critical analysis of the Objective Resolution clearly demonstrates that the pioneers of Pakistan wanted to establish such state where all of the religious minorities would have equal social standing (Butko, 2004). The human rights and rights of the minorities will be protected under the clauses of OR. But unfortunately, the orthodox religious scholars termed it differently and just focused on the process of Islamization and neglected the human rights (Ismail 2004).

Islamism is a set of ideologies based on the Islamic as well as the political values. The religious entities made efforts to introduce Islamic political ideology. This is because since the partition, all of the major political groups gained the support of the religious groups (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). The religious groups had much popularity among the common people of Pakistan which led to religious populism in Pakistan. For example, after the end of long nightmare of dictatorship, Bhutto assumed the power and initiated the slogan of Islamic Socialism (Hadiz, 2018). Under his tenure, the qadiyani were declared non-Muslims and it was also made clear that non-Muslim cannot be President or Prime Minister of the country. Bhutto was the most populist leader during seventies. Although he had secular outlook but he too had to compromise with the religious community of the country.

Bhutto's populism is related to left-wing perspective because he tried to gain patronage of the people on the slogan of roti, kapra, makaan (Niazi 1987). This slogan was directly related with the poor and deprived class of Pakistan. He also started an anti-corruption movement to hold the elite politicians accountable before law. Bhutto also adopted anti-west and anti-capitalistic rhetoric because the military and political elites of Pakistan had relations with capitalism and western blocs (Nanda 1972). He initiated the streak of brotherhood among the Muslim countries which also made him populist leader. The establishment of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was also one of his leading initiatives (Khan, 2003).

In the post-Bhutto period, Zia-ul-Haq once again declared martial law in Pakistan and his longest tenure of almost 11 years proved the milestone for the process of Islamization. He introduced so many Islamic reforms i.e., Masjid-Maktab schools, International Islamic University, Federal Shariah Court, Islamic research centers, Islamic Ideology Council and many others (Yilmaz, 2011). It does not mean that process of Islamism is criticized but actually true Islamic values were not patronized (Lodhi, 2012). It was an Islamic agenda to gain fame and popularity among the masses because the masses of the country are emotionally blackmailed in the name of religion (Snellinger, 2018).

4. Populism in Post-Musharraf Period

During the Musharraf period, there came a shift of paradigm in the politico-religious populism in Pakistan. The religious populism was not given as much adherence as it was in the previous political history of Pakistan (Khan, 2005). Islamism and religious populism were tired to keep outside of the parliament. In the reaction of this shift, the religious organs retaliated and gave tough time to Musharraf regime. During the whole Musharraf period especially in the post 9/11 period, a wave of terrorism stated across the country (Cohen, 2004).

After the end of Musharraf period, PPP came into power with the sympathetic votes of Benazir Bhutto. Although PPP was not as much popular during the pre-murder era of Benazir, the emotional sentiments of the masses gave victory to PPP that formed federal government under the leadership of President Zardari. This government cannot be termed as populist because the sudden sentiments withered away very soon. Later, PML (N) got popularity whose acceptance among the people was far better than PPP. In the meanwhile, a third party (PTI) emerged gradually.

5. Populist Narrative of PTI

In the post Musharraf period, PTI emerged as the most populist political party in Pakistan. Imran Khan entered in the Pakistani politics in 1996. Basically, he was a cricketer and being a cricketer, he is well-known across the globe. He rose as the popular cricketer after winning the cricket world cup of 1992 but later he started to take part in national politics through his political party PTI. In the start, PTI was a fragile party because Khan himself failed to secure the seat of national assembly but he remained committed. He was almost unknown in the national politics till 2008 but his manifesto of anti-corruption and anti-elitism helped him to penetrate into the national politics (Mir, 2018).

Prior to PTI's popularity, there was mainly two-party system in Pakistan i.e., PML (N) and PPP and people had been fed up from the mutual traditional rivalry of the both and wanted to bring third political power in country. On the other hand, the poor performance of the previous political parties also helped Imran Khan to emerge as the populist leader (Mufti, 2016). Khan adopted the main agenda just like that of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as both of them ran their political campaigns in order to leverage the poor class of Pakistan. Both of them raised the slogans of anti-elitism and anti-corruption which inspired the common people and they established their governments (Paracha, 2019). The post-government performance of both is another debate but it is reality that after Bhutto Imran Khan emerged as the most populist leader in Pakistan (Mehdi, 2013).

The general elections 2013 proved the major breakthrough for Khan as PTI although could not win the majority seats in the national assembly but it proved as the second largest political party (Mehdi, 2013). PTI also formed provincial government in KPK and posed tough time for government as opposition. Despite, Khan was not in government yet he was being considered the populist leader because on his single call thousands of the people used to come out of the home to attend the public meeting of Imran Khan (Mullah, 2017).

Imran Khan rose as the reformist leader. It was hoped that he will perform better at local and international levels due to his outspoken outlook. He was also popularized among the masses because he was already a national hero and did not have political background which were a few unique features that helped Khan to rise as populist leader (Abbas, 2018). The earlier strategy Khan adopted was anti-establishment and socio-economic populism. He focused on the basic human needs by locating the lack of investment's initiatives regarding the human and educational development. All of the common Pakistani wished to have such populist leader who could talk about their problems and needs (Sajid & Latif, 2019).

Other than the anti-establishment and socio-economic populism, Khan also strongly criticized the dynastic and traditional political setup of Pakistan because in the case of Pakistan, the majority of the politicians belong to the dynastic politics which does not mean only Sharifs and Bhuttos rather the other members of provincial and national assemblies also belonged to dynasty politics (Islam et al, 2019). According to him, such members generally belong to the elite class which does not know about the issues and problems of the common people. He wished to establish a new political class based on young and energetic members who could serve by heart in their respective jurisdictions. This made Imran Khan as the most populist leader in the post-Musharraf period (Abbas, 2018).

Khan's populist outlook started to emerge during the Musharraf period when he openly criticized the US drone attacks on the people of Pakistan in NWFP. When through speeches and statements, the US drone attacks were not stopped he blocked the road which cut of the NATO supply to Afghanistan (Chowdhry & Houreld, 2012).

As it had already been mentioned above that Pakistani politics remained under the influence of religion. Different political leaders and political parties established relations with religious community and adopted the religious touch in political set

which helped them to gain the sympathies of masses (Hoodbhoy, 2021). The observance of religious rituals is good but when the religious agenda is adopted for political gains, it is not good. Under the PTI political career, religious ideas and Islamism are widely used which on some occasions proved true efforts to inculcated Islamic values as but also sometime used as political tool. But overall, Khan's populism was largely religiously motivated as he continued to talk about the Caliphs of Islam, Riasat-e-Madina, religious literature and TV dramas etc. (Chowdhry & Houreld, 2012).

6. Major Populist Narratives

During the political history of Pakistan different populist narratives had been adopted by the populist leaders. The aim of the narrative is to change the perception of the citizens and to gain their support in elections. In the contemporary period following are the major populist narratives the political leaders are/had been employing.

6.1. End of Corruption

End of corruption had been the top priority of every populist narrative in the politico-religious narrative of Pakistan. The tale of corruption is as much old as Pakistan itself. First of all, Ayyub Khan charged the corruption cases against the political leadership so that he could enjoy the maximum tenure of his rule. Later, Bhutto was also accused of corruption and rigging by the opposition alliance. Similarly, both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif continued to use the narrative of ending of corruption in Pakistan. The main narrative of corruption was adopted by Imran Khan whose basic political narrative was to disclose the corruption of both PPP and PML (N). This was one of PTI's major agenda which got fame among the Pakistani people who later supported him in general elections of 2018 (Cheema, 2018).

6.2. Economy

Every newly established government blames the previous government about the fragileness of economy. In post-Musharraf period, PPP remained in power for five years and later PML (N) blamed the PPP government to deteriorate the national economy of Pakistan and promised to enhance the economic situation (Bokhari, 2019). In comparing between PPP and PML (N) tenures from 2008-2018, the economic situation during PML (N) was better than PPP. But later, PTI fully ran its political campaign on the basis of corruption and deteriorated economy. Khan blamed of these political parties of being involved in the corruption cases and money laundering which sacked the economic betterment (Kari, 2019). Furthermore, the PDM government established for a short period of time also adopted the narrative of economic fragileness and inflation and promised to address these issues on priority basis but all in vain.

6.3. Social Welfare Programs

Social welfare programs are generally associated with well-being of the citizens. According to the basic principles of democracy, it is promised to strive for the development of welfare programs in order to provide better service delivery to the people (Ali et al, 2015). In the post-Musharraf period, all of the religious and political parties employed the narrative of social welfare programs. PTI government took many initiatives regarding welfare of the community. For example, the Ehsas Program during the corona period, Langar Kahna, Panah Gah were some of the few social welfare programs initiated by Khan. Although Khan's these welfare programs were also criticized by the PDM but he continued to take such steps to provide better facilities to the poor and homeless people. The most of the welfare programs of the political parties are just pointed out during the election campaigns but on concrete level nothing is done as Khan promised to construct millions of the homes and provide employment opportunities for the poor and needy people but such dreams did not come true (Mehdi, 2013). Similarly, in the previous tenure, Nawaz Sharif promised to establish public hospitals at division level but it again proved false political narrative.

6.4. Economic Inequality

Addressing the economic inequality is another populist political narrative employed by the political leaders in Pakistan. Again, during the period of 2008-2022 Imran Khan is the only populist political leader who committed to end the economic inequality among the different social segments of country (Looney, 2008). On the other side, religious groups also adopted the same slogan but it is bitter reality that nothing is carried out regarding this populist political narrative. Even Khan could not take tangible steps to end the economic inequality. The reason is the feudal and elite political mindset in Pakistan. In the presence of political elitism, it is almost impossible to work on the equal economic opportunities. They hold local and foreign properties and pay little or zero attention to such initiative that are against their interests (Gishkori, 2020).

6.5. Political Elitism

Political elitism is another populist narrative the political leaders use during their election campaigns. PTI under the leadership of Imran Khan promised to get rid of the political elitism because the whole of the political setup is hacked by the elite class. Both PML (N) and PPP the leading political parties are based on elitism and nepotism. Not only these two rather majority of the other political parties are also led by the feudal figures belong to different are of country. PTI also mobilized its manifesto through its narrative of elimination of political elitism (Mullah, 2017). On unbiased point of view, there is perhaps only one political party i.e., Jamat e Islami which is based on meritocracy because its selection of Ameer is truly based on the merit where a common man like Siraj-ul-Haq can also be elected as Ameer of Jamaat.

6.6. Nationalist Sentiments

Nationalist sentiments are largely adopted as party narrative. This is one of the most populist political narratives widely used by the political parties where the political leaders arouse the national sentiments of the people especially in the relation to US, India and Israel. All of the populist leaders adopt this narrative as Khan raised the narrative of anti-west in order to get rid of the western slavery (Afzal, 2019). Other than the nationalist, the ethnic sentiments are also adopted to gain the mass support. All of the regional parties show their concern to safeguard their local areas like PML (N) raise the slogan of Punjab, PPP of Sindh, and PTI of KPK etc. (Khan, 1999).

7. Implications of Populist Narrative in Pakistan

The populist leaders try to bring radical changes in any society which have both positive and negative implications. In the case of Pakistan, the populist political leaders like Bhutto and Khan also tried to bring revolutionary changes due to which Pakistan had to face different implications. Following are some of the prominent implications of populism in the perspective of Pakistan.

7.1. Corruption

The populist leaders have developed higher level of trust among the masses that people start to follow them blindly. They raise the slogans of anti-corruption movements but on practical basis they themselves are found to be involved into the corruption cases. The ministers and advisors loot immense wealth under the banner of populist political parties. The same happened in the case of Pakistan that corruption level increased despite the strong anti-corruption campaign.

7.2. Political Instability

Populism led to political instability in Pakistan. In both Bhutto and Khan cases, there were established strong anti-government groups which fostered the political instability. Populist agenda is mainly contrary to the other political parties which part the ways among the different political parties and ultimately political chaos was created during the waves of populism.

7.3. Institutional Strain

Another prominent implication of populism in Pakistan is institutional strain. The powerful state institutions of Pakistan can bear a populist leadership. The populist leadership threatens the powers of state institutions which is why it generated institutional tussles.

7.4. Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is like the backbone of every country's policy but every time the populist narrative tried to change the foreign of Pakistan. Here again the foreign policies of both Bhutto and Khan are similar to some extent because both of them adopted anti-western polices and tried to align with anti-western blocs which affected the foreign policy. Bhutto tried to adopt a balanced approach with Soviet Union and USA and similarly Khan tried to adopt the pro-Russian and Chinese foreign policies. By the same token, they also tried to establish strong relations with other Muslim countries especially with the Middle East (Batool, 2023).

7.5. Short Term Policies

The wave of populism considers itself to be in power for long time but in actual it did not work in Pakistan. The populism could not work for even a decade which leads to short term policies. The short-term policies are never in the favor of the political stability and economic strengthening. Political stability, economic prosperity and social harmony are mainly fostered through long term policies (Batool, 2020).

7.6. Social Segregation

Populism leads to social segregation among the different segments of the society. The populist narrative influenced the young and new generation every time which parted the ways from the other political groups. This leads political polarization because the young generation are not willing to accept the agenda of the traditional politicians. Hence social segregation is another key implication of populism.

8. Countering Populist Threats

It is important to counter such populist threat which is not in the favor of socio-economic prosperity and political stability of the country. Such populist threats ought to be tackled timely so that the social, political and economic spheres of the country can be protected. Following are a few points that are useful in countering the populist threats.

- First of all, the state institutions should be strengthened. There is need to address the flaws in the institutions like judiciary, politics (democracy), electoral, and other prominent institutions.
- Secondly, the cases of corruption and black sheep should be tackled with ironic decisions so that the officials working of the behalf of the institutions may perform adequately.
- Thirdly, the culture of transparency and accountability should be promoted.
- Fourthly, adequate policies should be adopted in accordance to the needs and resources of the country.
- The civic education should be promoted among the masses which would create awareness among the people.

- Political dialogue should be started among the different political parties which would promote political stability and social harmony in the society.
- Media should be given freedom which will speed up the flow of information.
- Economic initiatives should be taken to foster the economic development, sustainable growth, and employment opportunities in the country
- The democratic leadership should be promoted which has confidence of majority of the masses which will snub the short-term populist narrative.

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