



The Rise of Populism in Pakistan: Implications for Democracy

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Abstract

This article assesses the political rise of populism in Pakistan and its consequences for democratic governance. Populism is conceptualized as an ideology that dichotomizes society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: THE PURE PEOPLE and THE CORRUPT ELITE. It sets up a moral difference between these groups and valorizes and legitimizes the populace while demeaning the elite. The article defines the main characteristics that populist leaders and their audience exhibit, why the former are appealing, and how the latter is mobilized. Populism is not necessarily anti-democratic but does threaten the liberal democratic ideal of protecting individual rights. Often, populists are supporters of the needs of the majority or native groups, often at the cost of individual liberties and diverse interests. Furthermore, the article identifies the underlying drivers of contemporary populism, categorizing them into three broad dimensions: Globalization and its consequences in economic stagnation and inequality, the diminishment of political parties, and a 'cultural backlash' towards progressive values.

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, Populist Leaders, Populist Supporters, Globalization, Economic Inequality, Progressive Values, Political Parties

Introduction

Since the dawn of this century, we have seen the rise of populism become a defining feature of contemporary politics across the globe, manifesting in myriad forms and venues. This political thing has grown in prominence over recent years in Pakistan to the extent that it has impacted the country's democratic landscapes. It refers to populism, a populism that appeals to the 'ordinary people' against an allegedly corrupt elite and which recasts political discourse and appeals to the popular cause through narratives that resonate with specific (often widespread) grievances.

When populist leaders become centerstage, it is important to study the ideological and/or strategic consequences of their leadership for democratic governance. This article addresses populism in Pakistan, discussing how it animates the political environment and the problems it creates for the norms of an established democracy. On the one hand, populism becomes a vehicle for giving a face to those groups that are marginalized and face serious socio-economic issues; on the other hand, populism also carries with it some serious problems: i.e., how does one protect individual rights and the functional integrity of the democratic system itself.

Understanding the attributes of populist leaders, their supporters, and the juggad of the context that fuels this rise is imperative to the more extensive democratic engagements in Pakistan. It will first define populism and outline its main characteristics before analyzing how populism developed differently and within the Pakistani political landscape. This exploration aims to add to the evolving discussion surrounding political



movements in Pakistan and how they impact governance and civil society by critically surveying the link between populism and democracy.

Understanding Populism

Conceptual Framework

Populism is a multifaceted political phenomenon that defies a singular definition. However, it can be broadly characterized as an ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" as "the counter elite" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). Social reality is easily simplified into this binary framework, and, significantly, this binary forces a moral dilemma centering on the populist leader as the authentic voice of ordinary people as opposed to a perceived corrupt establishment.

Populism is not a series of policies or ideologies but a way of doing politics. This encourages a story that presents a fundamental struggle between the interests of a vast majority and those of an elite minority. Usually depicted in stark terms, this is a conflict where the elite are depicted as self-serving and disconnected from the very real lives leading citizens live. This has the effect of valorizing populist rhetoric in valorizing 'the voice of the people' as claiming to represent the true interests and aspirations of the masses (Laclau, 2020).

Key Characteristics

1. **Dichotomous Framing:** Populists feed on creating an "us versus them." The us and them are primarily ordinary people portrayed as virtuous and deserving, and the them as corrupt and out of touch, the elite. This framing offers simple political issues and helps create a corporate identity among supporters.
2. **Charismatic Leadership:** Charismatic populist leaders lead combinations of populist movements. These leaders engage emotionally charged rhetoric to galvanize support and mobilize action (Weyland, 2001).
3. **Anti-Establishment Sentiment:** Populism's rhetoric critiques existing political institutions and parties that are pointedly accused of not adequately serving the populace. Individuals who are not included in the establishment or have been disillusioned with the work of traditional political actors have noticed the resonance of this anti-establishment sentiment (Rooduijn, 2014).
4. **Simplification of Complex Issues:** Populist leaders make simple socio-economic and political problems look like very simple solutions, tapping into their supporters' emotional and immediate concerns. This oversimplification creates an unrealistic expectation of governance and policy implementation (Moffitt, 2016).



5. **Mobilization Strategies:** Grassroots mobilization remains a favorite for populist movements, which utilize social media and mass rallies to interact directly with their supporters. This grassroots approach strengthens the public's perceptions of inclusivity and responsiveness to public sentiment (Kriesi, 2014).

Populism in Context

Populism exists in all three wings of the political spectrum—the right, center, and left—but always in a particular cultural, economic, and historical context. Populism is being pushed in Pakistan due to a combination of socio-economic grievances, disappointment with the old parties, and culture against the spread of progressive values. Our analysis of these contextual elements allows us to see how populism works in the Pakistani political environment and its fallout for democratic governance.

However, the conceptual framework of populism can be used to analyze the phenomenon's emergence and impact in different settings, such as Pakistan. How do we understand these dynamics concerning populism and the prospects of democracy?

Populism in Context

While populism is a left, right, and centrist phenomenon, it is always mediated through specific cultural, economic, and historical contexts. A brew of socio-economic grievances, disillusionment with traditional political parties, and a cultural backlash against progressive values combine to make Pakistan a more populist nation. When we look at these contextual elements, we can understand how populism works in the Pakistani political landscape and its implications for democratic governance.

The conceptual framework of populism provides insight that can help in the research of its emergence worldwide, particularly in Pakistan. Understanding these dynamics is important to assess the challenges and opportunities of populist movements within democracy.

Populism and Democratic Governance: Challenges to Liberal Democracy

Populism has become a rising challenge to liberal democracy, in particular to the contemporary political landscapes of our world. Populism's appeal to the supposed interests of 'the common people' against what it sees as a corrupt elite can sever the bonds between democracy and everyday democratic practice. Sohail admits this phenomenon is more pronounced in places like Pakistan, where populist movements have grown because of widespread disillusionment with traditional political parties and the whole governance system.

A significant burden of populism is the weakening of institutional integrity. Populist leaders routinely affix blame on traditional institutions — the judiciary, press, and electoral bodies, for instance — for being part of a corrupt elite that blocks the people's will. While the logic of this attack on institutional legitimacy can vitally undermine checks



and balances, this can enable populist leaders to act with power unchecked (Galston, 2018). Second, in this context, the populist narrative tends to emphasize strongly a direct connection between the leader and the people, which can work to destroy the representative nature of democratic governance and adopt a majoritarian approach that can inflict injury to minority groups (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Additionally, populism commits to such a narrow, simplistic, and emotionally driven understanding of politics that it renders it difficult for any rational discourse. The oversimplification of SE outcomes via this populism can lead to unrealistic governance/policy outcomes expectations for a deeply embedded socio-economic problem (Moffitt, 2016). In Pakistan, we are starting to see leaders offering radical change but failing to address the complexities of governance and creating public disillusionment when the promises are not kept.

It is also worth noting how populism impacts political parties. As a problem, the populist challenge presents itself well to traditional political parties, who often cannot work out how to adapt to it, consequently dividing the political landscape. However, if populist movements collect more support, the relative role of the established parties might fall to the point that they can no longer compete with the new political formations and thus become unstable and polarizing in governance (Hawkins et al., 2019). It can further destabilize democratic governance by hindering the performance of the processes of the legislation in their effective ways and capacity of the compromise.

Meanwhile, populism's resurgence can turn democracies into places of insecurity. The framing of opponents as enemies of the people, coupled with populist leaders' habit of creating a toxic political environment, often stunts political polarization, as leftist and rightist parties could not resist this move even without what happened to them (Kriesi, 2014). In such an environment, citizens may have grown disillusioned with democracy and ask why it is necessary and what makes it legitimate, a problem with far-reaching implications for democratic stability.

Case Study: Pakistan

However, populism has emerged in Pakistan tremendously due to leaders like Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. In electing Khan to power in 2018, Pakistanis effectively threw out the political establishment as they felt it was corrupt and ineffectual. Raising its populist strategies, the PTI promised measures to check corruption and undertake socio-economic reforms to benefit the deprived, especially in countries where economic problems have marginalized people experiencing poverty.

The rhetoric hit home among people fed up with economic stagnation and inequality. A diverse electorate had by then become disillusioned with traditional political parties, seen as overly political, self-serving, and giving little thought to the needs of



regular citizens. His promises of ridding the country of corruption and social justice appealed to Weyland (2023). emphasizes that the PTI's campaign narrative revolved around a moral one, which relied on creating the impression that Khan himself was the nation's salvation and that this latter point helped cement a direct relationship between him and his supporters.

The promise of simplification has run headlong with the complexities of governance. When he was in power, Khan had to tackle a struggling economy, spiraling inflation, and rising debt, which limited his ability to deliver on his ambitious plans. However, his initial enthusiasm began to wane as citizens dealt with a prolonged series of harsh economic realities, locked down by the COVID-19 pandemic and weighed down by fears of a nuclear standoff with Iran. This disconnect between populist rhetoric and the practicalities of governance illustrated a common dilemma faced by populist leaders: a disillusionment that results from the gap between promise and performance and from backlash by the constituencies that first supported them.

In addition, PTI's governance has raised issues related to democratic norms and the integrity of institutions. However, critics accuse Khan's government of being authoritarian, including efforts to silence dissent, dominate media stories and cripple opposition parties. It is part of a broader pattern of populist leaders who start as champions of the people before they look to take undemocratic powers for their consolidation. The erosion of democratic norms highlighted here, therefore, concerns the long-term implications of governance in Pakistan, as populism generally prioritizes the will of the majority at the expense of the rights of the minority (Levitsky & Roberts, 2021).

Also, the rise of populism in Pakistan cannot be distanced from a social and cultural backdrop. The country has been ground into a place where progressive values have met a thousand backlashes, especially on such issues as gender equality and religious pluralism. Often, populist leaders profit from these cultural tensions by painting themselves as protectors of traditional values against movements of modernization and liberalization. The dynamic can further exacerbate the clash of societal lines and hinder democratic ideals as segments of a population become against changes that they see as challenging to their cultural identity (Khan, 2020).

The summary of the above case of populism in Pakistan shows how, in a complex interaction, charismatic leadership, economic discontent, and cultural factors played a role in populism. While populist movements can very often be a means to enable the marginalized to enter platforms and speak for themselves about legitimate grievances, here, too, populist movements have challenges, and one of the most significant challenges is to the institutions and the norms that guarantee democracy. As the political reality is changing, Pakistan needs to tackle this wisely and in a way that ensures democratic values stay strong and that popular cultures are not primary.



Conclusion

The rise of populism in Pakistan is a significant development for Pakistan's democratic governance. Populism can give voice to the grievances of the marginalized and serve as a place to respond to pressing social and economic concerns. However, it has significant disconcerting aspects regarding defending people's rights and the integrity of democratic institutions. The dynamo of populism—creating an 'us versus them' narrative—can stigmatize dissenters and threaten the underpinnings of established democratic norms.

In a country where populist movements pose challenges, Pakistan must create a political environment in which all the legitimate concerns of its people are addressed. However, on the same basis, the principles of democracy should also be upheld. It begins with strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and encouraging honest dialogue with our entire society. Knowing the drivers and organization of such populist movements can help Pakistan strengthen a more resistant democracy. This democracy can separately meet populism's demands while ensuring individual rights and social cohesion. Doing that allows the country to strive to navigate the complexities generated by populism and usher forth a just and equal foot for every citizen in the country.

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