



## *The Rise of Populism in Pakistan: Imran Khan's Leadership and its Democratic Implications*

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### Abstract

This research examines the impact of Imran Khan's populist leadership on Pakistan's democratic institutions and political culture. Employing qualitative methodology, the study analyzes primary data from interviews with political science experts and secondary sources including speeches, academic literature, and media reports. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Müller, Mudde, and Mouffe, the research reveals how Khan's anti-elite rhetoric, Islamic-populist discourse, and emotional appeals have profoundly affected Pakistan's democracy. Findings indicate that while Khan mobilised youth political participation, his leadership predominantly weakened democratic institutions through unconstitutional actions, public denunciation of the judiciary, and refusal to legitimise opposition. His tenure witnessed the emergence of hybrid democracy, increased military intervention, and the transformation of political culture from rational policy debate to a personality-based, emotionally driven engagement characterised by intolerance and polarisation. The study concludes that Khan's populist governance eroded parliamentary democracy, institutional integrity, and pluralistic norms essential for democratic stability. The research underscores the need for strengthening institutional safeguards and promoting pluralistic political culture to enhance Pakistan's democratic resilience against populist challenges.

**Keywords:** Populism; Democratic Institutions; Political Culture; Imran Khan



## INTRODUCTION

Populism remains one of the most contested concepts in contemporary political science, lacking a universally accepted definition despite its global prevalence. Scholars have defined it variably across regions: in Europe, it manifests as an 'us versus them' dichotomy distinguishing Europeans from foreigners; in the United States, it is associated with the rise of leaders like Donald Trump, framing white Christian identity against other communities; while in South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, it intersects with religious and class-based divisions. As Jaegers and Walgrave articulate, populism fundamentally 'refers to the people and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with the people,' rooted in anti-elite sentiments while treating the populace as a monolithic group (Rastogi, 2021).

Since Pakistan's inception, populism has shaped its political landscape across both democratic and authoritarian regimes. The rise of Imran Khan as a populist leader in the 21st century represents a significant development warranting systematic examination. Khan's populist narrative has evolved strategically: initially focusing on anti-corruption rhetoric and accountability (2011), incorporating Islamic symbolism and his vision of 'Riyasat-e-Madina' during his premiership (2018-2022), and subsequently attributing his government's downfall to American interference following the 2022 vote of no confidence. This research argues that Khan's populist leadership poses substantial challenges to Pakistan's parliamentary democracy, contributing to political polarization, societal divisiveness based on party affiliation, and the erosion of democratic tolerance (Ku Shah, 2022).

As chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Khan exemplifies populist leadership by positioning himself as the authentic representative of 'ordinary people' against a 'corrupt elite.' Following Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) framework, he divides Pakistani society into binary categories: virtuous masses versus corrupt establishment figures, particularly targeting the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP). His rhetoric employs what Yilmaz and Saleem (2022) term 'Islamic-populism,' invoking religious legitimacy alongside political reform. This approach resonates powerfully in Pakistan's religious context, where Khan leverages his pre-political achievements—cricket stardom, philanthropic projects including Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, and Namal University—to establish credibility as an outsider challenging systemic corruption.

Müller (2016) identifies critical features distinguishing populism from legitimate democratic opposition: populists are not merely anti-elite but fundamentally anti-pluralist, claiming exclusive representation of 'the people' while delegitimizing opponents. As Turkish President Erdoğan famously challenged critics: 'We are the people. Who are you?' This exclusionary logic, claiming to represent not just 99% but 100% of the people, threatens democratic pluralism—the foundation of representative governance. While populists rule in the people's name, their governance often concentrates power, undermines institutional checks, and rejects the legitimacy of opposition voices.

Pakistan's political landscape has undergone significant transformation with the rise of populist leadership, challenging traditional democratic institutions and intensifying political polarization. This research examines how Imran Khan's populist governance has affected Pakistan's democratic processes, institutions, and political culture, investigating whether his leadership strengthened or undermined democratic values including free



elections, freedom of speech, parliamentary authority, and institutional balance of power. Addressing a critical juncture in Pakistan's democratic development, this study offers students, scholars, and policymakers valuable insights into balancing popular sovereignty with institutional stability. By examining Khan's populist trajectory, we illuminate broader patterns in Pakistan's political evolution and provide guidance for strengthening democratic resilience against future populist challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing Populism: Core Elements and Characteristics

Populism operates through three fundamental concepts that structure its political ideology and practice. First, "the people" serve as the central pillar of populist discourse. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) identify three interpretations of this concept: the people as sovereign entities, the common people as distinct from elites, and the people as nation. Modern democratic systems ostensibly enhance popular sovereignty and political power generation, yet populists manipulate these democratic ideals to construct a homogeneous notion of "the people" that excludes pluralistic realities.

The second core concept involves the elite, whom populists position as morally corrupt antagonists to the pure common people. This anti-elite rhetoric targets not merely political or economic elites but extends to cultural and media establishments, accusing all elite groups of favoring particular interests against the general will. However, Muller (2016) emphasizes that anti-elite sentiment alone does not constitute populism; rather, populism requires the additional element of anti-pluralism. Populist leaders claim exclusive representation of "the people," rejecting the legitimacy of opposition voices. Turkish President Erdogan's rhetorical question to domestic critics—"We are the people. Who are you?"—exemplifies this exclusionary logic, despite knowing his opponents are also citizens. This anti-pluralist stance represents populism's fundamental threat to democracy, which requires pluralism as its foundation.

Mudde defines populism as an "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism," highlighting its paradoxical relationship with democratic principles. While populism's roots trace to the Roman Empire, modern populism emerged prominently in the United States and Europe before spreading globally. Its rise correlates with widespread feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment toward modernization and globalization. Populists construct a moral dichotomy between pure people and corrupt elites, positioning themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of popular will. This moral framing allows populist leaders to justify all actions as inherently righteous, immune to questioning or critique.

When populists gain power, they continue blaming elites for systemic failures while concentrating authority in their hands, purportedly to control elite influence. They reject the democratic principle that majority decisions remain subject to revision and critique, instead treating majority will as absolute moral authority. Muller distinguishes democracy from populism by noting that democratic representatives authorize actions for public benefit while remaining accountable, whereas populists consider their actions unquestionable expressions of popular will. Furthermore, while liberal democracy embraces inclusionary politics and even advocates global citizenship, populism practices exclusionary politics, marginalizing identities and entities from decision-making processes. A populist regime with 51% support effectively ignores the remaining 49%, even denying their legitimate political identity.



### Populism as Threat to Democratic Norms

Muller's analysis identifies populism not as authentic democratic politics but as a perverted form of representative democracy where leaders claim authority through invoking "the people." Several critical features distinguish populist governance from democratic practice. First, populists frequently demand referendums not to enhance political participation but to demonstrate their exclusive claim to represent popular will. Second, populists often draft constitutions designed to concentrate power and ensure regime continuity under the guise of popular sovereignty. Third, while populism threatens democracy, engagement with populist discourse remains necessary, as dialogue with populists differs fundamentally from adopting populist rhetoric.

The democratic critique of populism centers on its exclusionary nature and rejection of institutional checks and balances. Populists view political opponents as enemies rather than legitimate competitors, mirroring authoritarian governance except that populists rule ostensibly in the people's name rather than through explicit force. This distinction proves largely cosmetic, as both systems undermine pluralistic democratic practice. Populism's incompatibility with liberal democracy stems from its refusal to protect minority rights, accept political opposition as legitimate, or acknowledge that democratic majorities can be wrong. These features create what Muller terms an "identity crisis" that endangers democratic stability.

The appeal of populism emerges partly from perceived failures of liberal democracy to address citizen concerns adequately. However, populist solutions typically exacerbate democratic deficits rather than resolve them. Populist leaders inhabit a fantasy world where they represent morally pure people against corrupt elites, using this narrative to justify concentrating power and dismissing institutional constraints. This pattern appears consistently across populist regimes globally, from Latin America to Europe to Asia.

### Populism in Pakistan: Context and Manifestation

Pakistan's populist trajectory reflects global patterns while exhibiting distinct contextual features. Javed (2021) situates Pakistan's populist turn within broader regional and global trends, noting the emergence of populist leaders—Modi in India, Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro in Brazil—who mobilized support through anti-establishment rhetoric, power centralization, and institutional norm violations. In Pakistan's case, Imran Khan emerged as a populist leader through several mechanisms. First, external threat perception, particularly regarding Modi's government and Kashmir tensions, created conditions favorable to nationalist populist appeals. Second, Khan's anti-corruption rhetoric and elite criticism resonated with common people frustrated by political establishment failures. Third, Khan positioned himself as defender of Muslim identity globally, campaigning against Islamophobia and enhancing his appeal across the Muslim world.

Khan's populism exhibits characteristics identified in theoretical literature. Yilmaz and Saleem (2022) analyze Khan's "Islamic-populism," which combines populist structure with religious legitimation. Khan frames his political project as creating "Riyasat-e-Madina," an Islamic model state, thereby infusing political objectives with religious moral authority. His background as cricket star and philanthropist strengthens his populist credentials as an outsider untainted by political establishment corruption. Khan's promise of a "New Pakistan" free from corruption exemplifies populist rhetoric positioning the leader as transformative agent representing pure people against corrupt elites.





Khan's populist practice demonstrates typical patterns: emotional appeals, social media mobilization, and refusal to accept political defeat as legitimate. Following his removal from power in 2022, Khan characterized events as unjust conspiracy, maintaining his populist narrative of victimization by corrupt forces. Sher Ahmad and Sumaya (2024) note that populism divides society into loyal and disloyal groups, with populists vilifying opponents. While not entirely anti-democratic, populism threatens liberal democratic norms and individual rights protection. Pakistan's experience confirms that populist leaders simultaneously attract diverse support while producing significant consequences for democratic institutional stability and pluralistic political culture.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative methods to evaluate political narratives, leadership patterns, and democratic outcomes in Pakistan, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources for comprehensive analysis. Primary data was collected through interviews with heads of Political Science Departments at four government colleges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Government Degree College Batkhela, Government Degree College Thana, Government Degree College Galabad, and Government Postgraduate College Dargai. These department heads were selected for their strong academic backgrounds and expertise in political science, providing valuable insights into political transformations under Imran Khan and his impact on democratic principles. Their specialized knowledge proved essential for understanding the complexities of populist leadership in Pakistan's democratic context.

Secondary data comprised books, academic papers, theses, newspaper articles, and editorials from national and international sources. Imran Khan's recorded speeches and interviews served as crucial primary sources, revealing his populist rhetoric and communication strategies. This multi-source approach ensured thorough examination of the research topic from various perspectives. The research project followed a structured timeline within the BS program requirements, beginning with proposal development in the first month, followed by data collection and analysis, culminating in thesis completion during the final semester month. After submission to the supervisor, all suggested corrections were incorporated to enhance research quality.

Purposive sampling was employed to select five knowledgeable participants with deep understanding of political science and democratic theory. This non-random sampling method ensured that interviewed experts possessed relevant expertise directly aligned with research objectives. The selection criteria focused on academic credentials, research experience in democratic studies, and familiarity with Pakistan's political landscape. This approach yielded meaningful data that addressed the central research questions about Imran Khan's influence on democratic institutions and political culture. The theoretical framework draws from Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe's concept of pluralist democracy, which offers a critical lens for analyzing populism arising from liberal democratic system breakdowns. Mouffe distinguishes between enemies who must be eliminated and adversaries who represent legitimate political differences deserving respect—a distinction crucial for healthy democracy. This framework guides the analysis of Imran Khan's populist strategies against political opponents while examining their implications for Pakistan's democratic integrity. Mouffe's theory enables systematic evaluation of whether Khan's leadership strengthened or undermined democratic values including free elections, freedom of speech, parliamentary authority, and institutional



balance, ultimately assessing how populist governance affects Pakistan's democratic future and political stability.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

This research employs both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data was gathered through qualitative interviews with senior faculty members from Political Science departments at four government colleges in Malakand: Professor Imdad ul Haq (Government Degree College Thana), Professor Fazal Rabi (Government Degree College Gul Abad), Professor Nasir Khan (Government Degree College Batkhela), and Professor Salman Khan (Government Postgraduate College Dargai). Secondary data included newspapers, research articles, and academic texts examining populism in Pakistan. The interviews explored populism's definition, emergence in Pakistan, and its effects on democratic institutions and political culture.

#### Understanding Populism and Its Emergence in Pakistan

According to Müller (2016), populism divides society into two antagonistic groups: the pure 'people' versus the corrupt 'elite,' with populists claiming exclusive moral representation while rejecting pluralistic debate. Professor Nasir Khan described populism as emotional attachment between leader and people, while Professor Fazal Rabi emphasized how populist leaders claim special ability to solve all societal problems, focusing emotions on a single charismatic figure. Professor Salman Khan characterized it as political terminology reflecting people's sentiments rather than practical implications, and Professor Imdad ul Haq noted that populist leaders perform acts to gain popularity based on emotional manipulation.

Regarding populism's emergence in Pakistan, all respondents identified Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as Pakistan's first true populist leader. Professor Nasir Khan explained that Bhutto emerged as Ayub Khan's opponent, introducing the famous slogan 'Roti, Kapra, aur Makan' that deeply resonated with masses. Professor Imdad ul Haq traced populism's origins to 1967, following the Tashkent Agreement when Bhutto separated from Ayub Khan and established the Pakistan People's Party. He noted that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman simultaneously emerged as a populist leader in East Pakistan, promoting Bengali nationalism and economic grievances. Professor Salman Khan emphasized Bhutto's targeting of lower classes and Sheikh Mujib's exploitation of Bengali sentiments. After a long period, Imran Khan revived populism with new slogans and style suited to 21st-century demands.

#### Factors Contributing to Imran Khan's Rise as Populist Leader

Multiple factors contributed to Imran Khan's populist ascendancy. Professor Nasir Khan identified three primary factors: First, the Charter of Democracy between PPP and PML-N created political space between mainstream parties and the establishment, leading to the search for an alternative political actor. Second, traditional parties neglected Pakistan's youth (over 50% of the population), creating a vacuum Khan exploited by addressing young generation's hopes and disappointments. Third, social media emergence allowed Khan and PTI to directly engage audiences, bypassing traditional media and building massive online followings.

Professor Fazal Rabi highlighted Khan's exploitation of Pakistan's numerous problems—poverty, unemployment, corruption, law and order issues—promising jobs, social justice, education reform, healthcare improvement, and his 'Naya Pakistan' slogan. Media played crucial roles spreading these messages. Professor Imdad ul Haq emphasized



military's indirect role and media support, noting that from 2007-2013, 60-70% of journalists supported Khan's ideas, with anchors conducting one-on-one interviews on various issues. Social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—proved instrumental. He also noted how dirty politics between traditional parties created public desire for new representation. Professor Salman Khan explained how traditional politics ignored technological advancement and youth participation, creating gaps Khan strategically captured by targeting neglected populations, knowing smaller constituencies would support him where larger ones wouldn't.

### Evolution of Khan's Populist Rhetoric

Professor Nasir Khan outlined Khan's core manifesto promises: eradicating corruption, developing 'Naya Pakistan,' creating welfare state modeled after Riyasat-e-Madina, and reforming institutions. While some commitments were delivered—Sehat Insaf Card providing medical assistance, police reforms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—foundational issues like corruption remained unaddressed. The National Accountability Bureau's record remained controversial and politically motivated, eroding public confidence. Before 2022's political crisis, Khan's popularity declined due to inflation and governance issues, but his removal from power and aggressive stance against establishment renewed support, particularly among youth.

Professor Fazal Rabi noted how Khan's party name 'Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf' emphasized justice, a broad term he used for social change slogans. The 2013 'Dharna Politics' shifted his narrative, eventually leading to confrontation with powerful institutions. Professor Imdad ul Haq traced Khan's political journey from 1996, initially opposing PPP and PML-N, welcoming Musharraf's martial law in 1999, later becoming Nawaz Sharif's ally in 2006-2007 for judges' re-appointment, then clashing with Sharif, targeting him as primary competitor from 2011 onward. Professor Salman Khan divided Khan's tenure into stages: pre-2011 when he lacked significant ground, 2011-2018 building support, 2018-2022 in government, and post-2022 becoming more aggressive against establishment. Khan's basic appeals to youth remained consistent, but populism's peak made him increasingly authoritarian, demanding loyalty and rejecting democratic norms when opposing his authority.

### Impact on Democratic Institutions

Populism's impact on democratic institutions proved largely negative. Professor Fazal Rabi emphasized parliament's sacred status in parliamentary democracy, noting that while Khan's government witnessed important constitutional precedents like the no-confidence motion, overall respect for political institutions—especially parliament and judiciary—did not increase. Judicial independence remained questioned and courts' roles controversial. Professor Imdad ul Haq argued Khan's populism weakened democratic institutions significantly. Khan considered himself above parliament, focusing on enemies rather than state development. His 2022 unconstitutional parliament dissolution damaged parliamentary morale. Military intervention in politics increased, with the May 9, 2023 incident placing political control in military hands. Pakistan experienced hybrid democracy's first phase (2018-2022) and continues in its second phase. Tolerance vanished, cult politics emerged, and politics became viewed as a dirty game. Politicians refused recognizing election results or each other's existence, treating rivals as threats and eliminating coexistence concepts.



Professor Nasir Khan described how Khan's opposition behavior constantly criticized government, making parliament unruly and diluting its dignity. His political style fostered hostility and abusive rhetoric culture. Regarding judiciary, Khan publicly denounced courts whenever judgments went against him, spreading misinformation and undermining institutions by consistently breaking democratic rules and norms. Professor Salman Khan noted positive aspects—developing youth political participation previously missing—but emphasized Khan's authoritarian populism disturbing institutional development. Despite the 18th Amendment's valuable improvements strengthening institutions by defining opposition leader roles and requiring mutual consultation for election commissioner appointments, Khan refused considering opposition legitimate, denying space to opposition leaders and members, thereby weakening democratic voters who opposed him.

### **Impact on Political Culture**

Political culture suffered severe deterioration under populist influence. Professor Fazal Rabi explained that political culture reflects society's general culture, requiring tolerance, respect, and space for opposition for stability. Democracy's beauty lies in respecting criticism and dissent. Khan's speeches transformed opposition into personal attacks and character assassination. When political leaders—who serve as role models—use impolite names, followers adopt similar behavior, eroding political tolerance. Criticism should address performance and policy, not personal attacks. During Khan's tenure, tolerance, respect for dissent, and opposition respect declined. Political division, hatred, intolerance, and vindictive behavior increased, limiting democratic space for other forces and negatively affecting overall political culture.

Professor Nasir Khan acknowledged Khan's contribution to political consciousness, particularly among youth, but noted he generated emotional and sentimental feelings rather than political rationality. Followers concentrated on personality over policies or performance, creating personality-based and loyalty-based political culture rather than intellectually informed analysis. While promoting youth political involvement, this fostered emotional rather than rational political engagement. Professor Imdad ul Haq described Khan's influence as complex and diverse—some viewing him as change agent and mobilizer, others as creating parochial culture. His leadership featured polarization, populism, and nationalism. While energizing many Pakistanis (especially youth) around anti-corruption agendas and economic reforms, his emotional appeals and simplistic answers diluted nuanced policy debate. His aggressive nationalism sometimes bordered on exclusionary approaches. Professor Salman Khan concluded Khan contributed to youth participation and political appearance, creating bases for active political engagement, while simultaneously representing extremist political culture lacking tolerance and opposition support.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates that Imran Khan's populist leadership has profoundly impacted Pakistan's democratic institutions and political culture, predominantly in detrimental ways. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Müller, Mudde, and Mouffe, alongside empirical data from political science experts, the study reveals how Khan's anti-elite rhetoric, religious symbolism, and emotional appeals characteristic of populist discourse have weakened parliamentary democracy while intensifying political polarization. Khan's claim to exclusively represent 'the people' against corrupt elites





exemplifies the anti-pluralist nature of populism that threatens democratic foundations requiring tolerance, institutional respect, and legitimate opposition.

The analysis confirms that while Khan successfully mobilized youth participation and political consciousness—a positive contribution to Pakistan's political landscape—his governance eroded critical democratic norms. His unconstitutional actions, particularly the 2022 parliament dissolution, public denouncement of judicial decisions, and refusal to legitimize opposition voices, damaged institutional integrity and parliamentary morale. The shift from democratic governance to hybrid democracy under his tenure, coupled with increased military intervention following the May 9, 2023 incident, demonstrates populism's capacity to concentrate power and undermine checks and balances.

Moreover, Khan's leadership transformed political culture from rational policy debate to personality-based, emotionally-driven engagement characterized by character assassination, intolerance, and cult politics. His Islamic-populist rhetoric, while resonating with religious sentiments, served primarily as strategic tool for mass mobilization rather than substantive governance reform. This research underscores the critical need for strengthening democratic resilience through institutional safeguards, promoting pluralistic political culture, and fostering rational civic engagement. Pakistan's democratic future depends on balancing popular sovereignty with institutional stability, ensuring that populist appeals do not override constitutional principles, minority rights protection, and the fundamental pluralism essential for sustainable democracy.

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