



Public Perception on Imran Khan Imprisonment: A Sentiment-Based Corpus Study of YouTube Users' Comments on BBC Channel

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Article Details:

Received on 16 April, 2026

Accepted on 15 May, 2026

Published on 20 May, 2026

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Abstract

This study examines public reactions towards Imran Khan's imprisonment. For this purpose, the researchers have used Python's Jupyter Notebook to create a dataset of YouTube users' comments on the BBC channel's news about Imran Khan's imprisonment. The sentiment analysis tool Orange has been used to analyze public responses to Imran Khan's imprisonment. After a thorough analysis of the data, the researchers have identified that the public shows positivity, praising Imran Khan as a morally uplifted and strong leader, while some express negativity regarding Imran Khan's identity. The highest positive sentiment in public discourse is 0.744, while the highest negative sentiment is 0.857. Key themes included: visionary leadership and humility; victimization and innocence discourse; justice for Imran Khan; accusations and identity assassination of Khan; anger and distrust toward the system.

Keywords: Imran Khan, Sentiment Analysis, Orange Software, Imprisonment, YouTube, Public Perception.



Introduction

Language and power have always been deeply intertwined, and nowhere is this relationship more visible than in the digital public sphere, where ordinary citizens respond to political events in real time. The rise of social media platforms such as YouTube has transformed political commentary, enabling millions of users to express opinions, emotions, and judgments about political figures and institutions in real time (Loader & Mercea, 2011). These digital spaces have become critical sites for examining public sentiment, particularly in politically volatile contexts where traditional media may be perceived as biased or controlled. Pakistan represents one such context, a country with a long and turbulent political history, where public trust in institutions has historically been fragile and where political discourse is deeply emotional and polarized.

Since gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan has confronted persistent governance challenges, including political instability, civil-military tensions, economic crises, and recurring bouts of authoritarianism. The country operated without a permanent constitution for nearly 26 years, and even after the promulgation of the 1973 Constitution, democratic governance remained inconsistent and frequently interrupted. Scholars have noted that Pakistan's democratic deficit is not merely a product of institutional weakness but is also deeply rooted in structural power imbalances between civilian governments and the military establishment (Rizvi, 2000; Siddiqa, 2007). These structural tensions have shaped political discourse in ways that are uniquely charged and consequential.

Imran Khan, founder of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Prime Minister from 2018 to 2022, became the first sitting Prime Minister in Pakistan's history to be removed through a no-confidence vote, followed by his arrest in May 2023 on charges that supporters widely described as politically motivated (Chaudhry, 2022; Fraser & Davies, 2023). His imprisonment sparked intense public debate over democratic legitimacy, judicial independence, and institutional accountability, making it a significant case for the study of digital political discourse.

Political events of this magnitude generate substantial online public discourse, and sentiment analysis of that discourse has emerged as a valuable methodological tool in computational linguistics and political communication research. Sentiment analysis refers to the computational identification and categorization of subjective information in textual data, typically classifying expressions as positive, negative, or neutral (Liu, 2012). The VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) model, developed by Hutto and Gilbert (2014), has proven particularly effective for analyzing sentiment in social media texts due to its sensitivity to informal language, capitalization, punctuation, and emoticons, features common in online political commentary. Studies employing VADER and related tools have successfully mapped public opinion on politically sensitive issues across a range of contexts, including elections, protest movements, and high-profile criminal cases (Giachanou & Crestani, 2016; Nasukawa & Yi, 2003).

Emotion-based frameworks have further enriched sentiment analysis by moving beyond simple polarity to capture the affective complexity of public responses. Ekman's (1992) theory of six basic universal emotions, namely anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise, has been widely adopted in computational emotion detection studies, offering a psychologically grounded taxonomy for classifying emotional content in corpora (Breeze & Hassan, 2024; Hassan et al., 2025). When combined with thematic analysis frameworks such as that proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), these tools enable



researchers to move from quantitative sentiment scores to richer qualitative interpretations of how public discourse is organized around key themes and narratives.

Despite a growing body of research on political sentiment analysis globally, relatively few studies have examined public reactions to political imprisonment and judicial proceedings in the Pakistani context through computational linguistic methods. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing 1,232 YouTube comments posted on the BBC News channel in response to coverage of Imran Khan's imprisonment. The BBC was selected as the data source because of its editorial neutrality relative to Pakistani domestic politics, its wide digital accessibility, and its credibility as a global news organization. This study aims to identify dominant sentiment patterns and recurring discursive themes in public responses to this landmark political event, contributing to the emerging literature on digital political discourse, computational sentiment analysis, and the sociology of public opinion in postcolonial democratic contexts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative model used the *Orange* software tools (Demsar et al., 2013) to analyze and identify the dominant sentiments and emotions. The qualitative part of this study involved analyzing statistical data and comments to identify deeper meanings and themes.

Corpus Design

The researchers have collected data from YouTube using Python code in a Jupyter Notebook. The YouTube API key of one of the researchers was used, along with the identification number of each video. A total of 1232 comments were retrieved from the BBC News channel to examine public perception. The data was retrieved in CSV format and then uploaded to the *Orange* software.

Corpus Analysis

After uploading the data to the *Orange* software, the *Sentiment Analysis* feature was used to categorize it into positive and negative sentiment using the *VADER* filter. The *Tweet Profiler* feature was then utilized to classify the data into different sub-emotions (Breeze & Hassan, 2024; Hassan et al., 2025). For this classification, the researchers used the Ekman emotional analyzer feature. The following figure shows the hierarchy of widgets used by the researchers for analyzing the dataset:



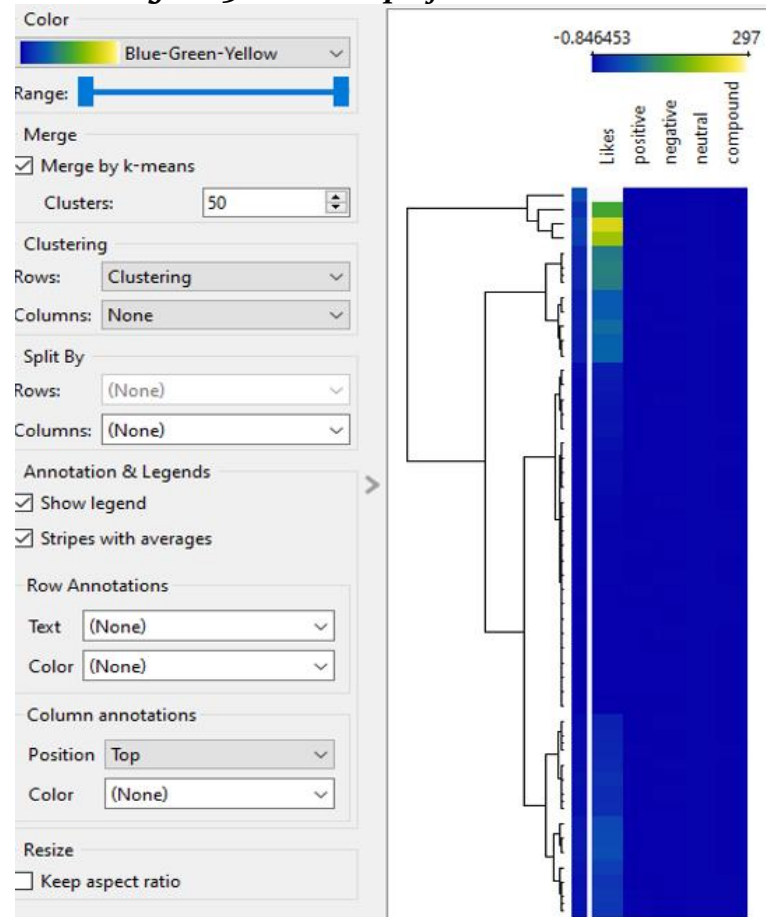
Figure 4: Concordance Lines of the Lemma 'Khan'

| | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | condem illegal arrest of Imran | khan |
| 2 | @ Aqashakeel - z9i Imran | Khan will free soon |
| 3 | @ tejindersingh9125 Mr imran | khan is committed for welfare of |
| 4 | @ akbargaincho I love Imran | khan |
| 5 | @ ahmadafzaalahmad5803 | khan is innocent , and honest |
| 6 | gifts more valuable from imran | khan gifts . the judge has |
| 7 | he is innocent (IMRAN KHAN) | IS NOT GUILTY . |
| 8 | them who is supporting imran | khan , including child and woman |
| 9 | @ shahsworld9977 He (imran | khan) is hypocrite and lead |
| 10 | were not enough , Imran | Khan Niazi has completed the troika |
| 11 | nawaz sharif government . Imran | khan is an honest Leader and |
| 12 | fake , they afraid of | Khan bcs khan will defeat them |
| 13 | they afraid of Khan bcs | khan will defeat them with a |
| 14 | @ TanwirSorathia Save Imran | khan with Mafia |
| 15 | @ shamraizgondal022 Imran | khan |
| 16 | @ tariqnawaz8003 Great leader Imran | Khan |
| 17 | ہم کے ساتھ | Imran Khan is the pakbondhu of this |
| 18 | We ' re with Imran | Khan |
| 19 | Plan was to target Imran | Khan and his Party as a |
| 20 | @ SultanKhan - yn1mn IMRAN | Khan greatest laedr |
| 21 | US , in unsettling Imran | Khan ' s government after his |
| 22 | @ mkhankhan330 Imran | khan is brave leader |
| 23 | Our last hope PM Imran | Khan |
| 24 | democracy in Pakistan , Imran | Khan is our true leader , |
| 25 | @ ranaosamRana8040 I Love Imran | Khan |
| 26 | @ imamali5228 Imran | khan is great leader in pakistan |
| 27 | @ usmanali - up1xt imran | khan is a honest person |

The concordance feature shows how a word appears in its surrounding context within the dataset. The figure given above shows the concordance lines of the lemma ‘Khan’, the most frequently occurring keyword. The results provide context for the word, such as in the phrase “Imran Khan will be free soon”, which conveys a sense of belonging and hope that Imran will soon be out of prison and that people will support him. Some argue that the charges against Imran Khan are fake, and others say he is being held on the court premises. People are emotionally attached to him and have only seen him as the best leader of Pakistan.



Figure 5: Heat Map of the Sentiments



Dominant Themes in the Data

Visionary Leadership and Humility

This theme demonstrates how users portray Imran Khan as an ethically higher, influential, and outstanding leader. Recurring language patterns include words that praise him, such as 'great,' 'honest,' and 'innocent.' The dataset's textural framing centers leadership on an individual and links morality to the individual. The recurring patterns were emotional, loyal, and Imran Khan stands out as a leadership symbol. For instance, "I love Imran Khan" shows an emotional bond with Imran Khan, giving a sense of belonging. This shows that viewers not only love him as a leader but also have an identity-based loyalty to him. "The best president of Pakistan" indicates that commentators respond with the highest praise for Imran Khan, placing him above all competitors. "Imran Khan is an honest Leader" shows that people are justifying his leadership and highlighting his moral qualities, presenting his honesty as a key quality. Additionally, "Great leader with vision" demonstrates his exceptional leadership through his foresight and vision; the responses show that they are linking his character traits to his leadership performance.

Victimization and Innocence Discourse

This theme shows the public reaction towards Imran Khan's imprisonment, that he is treated unfairly, the accusations against him are all false, or he is being targeted only politically. The court proceedings are linguistically reframed as subjugation. Viewers oppose institutional credibility and say these allegations are schemes against Khan. The recurring patterns in the dataset are like "fake cases", "illegal arrest", "politically motivated",



and “innocent.” For instance, “Strongly condemn illegal arrest of Imran Khan” shows delegitimization of judicial power. “All the cases are fake” demonstrates the people’s emotional reactions to his over 100 cases by asserting that they are fake and denying them. “Corruption charges are politically motivated” indicates that these charges are being framed, that the law has been violated, and that the ethical principle is being used as a political weapon. Moreover, “He is being punished for telling the truth” indicates that he is a victim and is unfairly treated.

Justice for Imran Khan

This recurring theme indicates people’s responses that go beyond mere thoughts and call for mobilization, collective strength, and opposition. Language shifts from analysis to collective action. The leader becomes a central figure in the larger campaign discourse on liberty and public awakening, and the markers in the corpus include calls to action, we, our leader, prayer, and unity-based symbols. For instance, “People from all corners of Pakistan should come out in support” indicates people’s reaction right after his imprisonment, and people from foreign countries are giving calls to Pakistani people to be awake and act collectively for Khan. “Stand with Imran Khan” conveys a unity-based discourse; therefore, people are with Imran Khan and trust him.

Accusation and Identity Attack on Khan

This theme explicitly targets Khan’s honesty, reliability, and moral character. Focused on the individual, they have targeted him directly with labels such as fraud, hypocrite, and corrupt, showing that viewers have directly attacked his morality by describing him negatively. The words have directly judged and removed credibility. The recurring patterns in the dataset highlighted his unethical behaviours, corruption allegations, satirical comparisons, and his unworthy representation. For example, “He is a hypocrite” shows how people reacted to Imran Khan’s imprisonment, which directly undermines his credibility and morality. “Lead the public by hypocrisy” suggests that the public is directly blaming Khan for misleading people, secretly controlling them, and deceiving them. “Political fraud” shows that people are not just blaming him for his actions, but they are rejecting him as a character and core identity.

Anger and Distrust over the Institution

This theme reflects strong emotions, particularly anger and moral outrage, as well as significant negative sentiments, such as disgust and deep-seated distrust of formal institutions, administrative systems, the court system, and the media. Commenters exhibit intense emotional responses, highlighting their strong feelings. The language they choose often contributes to a loss of trust in powerful institutions, portraying these systems as dishonest, controlled by the powerful elite, or premeditated in their actions. The language used blends ethical condemnation with elements of conspiracy narratives, making it more emotionally charged than purely institutional criticism. People express strong ethical judgments, deeming these institutions as disgusting and shameful, often labelling them as corrupt. For instance, a comment from the dataset states, “Such a shameful act - judges are corrupt,” which conveys ethical anger intertwined with institutional criticism.

The impactful language employed by the audience reinforces the belief that these institutions lack legitimacy. For example, someone said, “Disgusted by what is going on, and that the army controls everything,” illustrating how they perceive power as pervasive and authoritative. Each sentiment reinforces a growing distrust of these institutions. Commenters specifically blame powerful entities, such as the army, and assert that elites



exert control over the media. They point to the existence of injustice in Pakistan, which further deepens their distrust. Statements like “This is disgusting politics, and there is no justice in the courts” reflect how severely individuals are affected by these incidents, leading to a loss of confidence not only in the judicial system but also in politicians, whom they accuse of perpetuating a conspiracy. Moreover, one remark reads, “Pathetic situation and corruption everywhere,” encapsulating the widespread distrust in the system and conveying strong feelings of frustration. Overall, people are critical of the entire system, expressing their discontent with intensity.

Conclusion

This study examines the public reactions towards Imran Khan’s imprisonment. The researchers used the *Orange* software to retrieve sentiment scores and interpreted comments shared on social media, primarily on YouTube, revealing deep emotions. The researchers, through thematic analysis, have identified key themes in the dataset. The dataset featured highly polarized, emotionally charged language from commenters. The recurring supportive patterns portray him as an inspiring, principled, and strategic thinker, which is presented with praise, victim narratives, and opposed language used by the community. Positive commenters often use heroic imagery and assert that he is ethically right, employing language that advocates action and demonstrates both group identity and emotional support, rather than focusing solely on policy assessment. In contrast, negative comments tend to center on character rather than policy, highlighting claims of dishonesty and a significant lack of trust in institutions. This discourse frequently conveys ethical anger and employs devaluing language. Additionally, official bodies such as courts, the press, and governance systems are often depicted as manipulated or dishonest, reflecting a broader crisis of trust. Emotions such as shame, anger, and disgust amplify the impact of narratives in critical discourse. Overall, this study concludes that, based on a thorough analysis of the data, Imran Khan’s imprisonment was deemed unacceptable by the public, who have lost faith in powerful institutions in Pakistan and expressed negative sentiments targeting Imran Khan’s identity and political tactics.

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