

Populism and the Cyclical Struggle for Democracy in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of populism in Pakistan, arguing that it remains entangled in a cyclical struggle between democratic development and internal political disruptions. It contends that populism, particularly its right-wing variant has exploited religious and ethnic divisions to construct exclusionary narratives that position common masses in opposition to a perceived elite. Through a historical and discursive analysis of political leadership and movements, the study aims to answer that how populist rhetoric used in form of slogans are employed as a strategic tool for mass mobilization and ideological framing. The study categorizes populism in the Pakistani context into right wing, religious, and regressive variants, while situating these within the broader framework of political populism. The crux of the argument is that although populism has occasionally created space for democratic expression, it has more often undermined institutional integrity and weakened democratic norms, thereby contributing to the continued fragility of democratic governance in Pakistan.

Keywords: Populism, political polarization, and democratic trends.

Introduction

Pakistan is stymied in a cyclical battle for democracy affected by both internal political maneuvering¹ external pressures rooted in the consequences of capitalism and globalization. These dynamics have fueled the rise of populism as a counterforce, with historical processes further widening societal divides and creating fertile ground for populist tendencies² Political leaders have often relied on emotionally charged

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¹ Sher Ahmed Durrani, and Sumaya, 'The Rise of Populism in Pakistan: Implications for Democracy,' *Journal of Law, Society and Social Studies*, 3:1 (2021). <https://journals.uot.edu.pk/jlss/article/view/63>

² Ihsan Yilmaz, et al. 'Religious Populism in Pakistan', *Religious Populisms in the Asia Pacific*, edited collection, Vol. 13, No. 9 (2022), 802.

rhetoric, portraying themselves as messianic figures capable of resolving the nation's political, social, and economic challenges.³

This article explores the rise of populism in Pakistan's political landscape, focusing specifically on the emergence and consolidation of right-wing populism by addressing key gaps in analyzing major populist figures across Pakistan's political history, highlighting how each employed distinct populist strategies within their party frameworks and utilized the discursive power of populist slogans highlighting how political language, through specific lexical and rhetorical strategies, subtly embeds ideological meanings. While tracing its history the notable figure of Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq of the Krishak Praja Party emerges who pioneered early populism through agrarian advocacy. Following him appeared Liaquat Ali Khan of Muslim League whose tenure emphasized anti-feudal economic reforms outlined in his 1949 manifesto. After him, Fatima Jinnah gained popularity for representing the Combined Opposition Parties (COP),⁴ embodied in democratic defiance against military authoritarianism. However, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) redefined populism through pro-poor policies, socialist rhetoric, and charismatic leadership. With Benazir Bhutto further adapting her father's legacy invoked populist ideals of women's empowerment and civilian supremacy.

More recently, Imran Khan of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has recast populism by channeling anti-status quo narratives, invoking Islamic moralism, and deploying anti-corruption discourse, continuing to shape Pakistan's political imagination amidst enduring socio-economic and institutional crises.⁵ Khan, erstwhile cricket luminary and founder of PTI in 1996, has emerged as a paradigmatic figure in contemporary Pakistani politics through the cultivation of a distinctive populist discourse.⁶

³ Abdul Sattar, and Mahboob Hussain, 'Oscillating Between Populism and Democracy: Politics of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and the Right-Wing Religious Parties', *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences*, 2:2 (2024). <https://ijciss.org/index.php/ijciss/article/view/1378>

⁴ Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan: The Enigma of Political Development* (New York: Routledge, 2019). <https://biblio.ie/book/pakistan-enigma-political-development-ziring-lawrence>.

⁵ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Imran Khan and Populist Politics in Pakistan* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2227-1>

⁶ Syeda Sana Batool, and Muhammad Javed Iqbal, 'We Are on the Same Page: The Curious Case of Imran Khan's Populism in Pakistan', *Journal of Political Studies*, 29:1 (2022), 57. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358910092_We_Are_on_the_Same_Page_The_Curious_Case_of_Imran_Khan's_Populism_in_Pakistan

Initially, PTI's campaigns centered on anti-corruption and the ideological construct of a 'Naya Pakistan', yet the party's early electoral forays yielded limited success.⁷ Over subsequent electoral cycles, Khan strategically employed mass mobilization, digital media outreach, and the framing of entrenched political elites as both corrupt and subject to foreign influence, thereby consolidating a significant support base among youth and conservative constituencies. The 2013 general elections marked PTI's ascendance as a principal political actor, culminating in its electoral triumph in 2018 and Khan's subsequent assumption of the premiership. His populism is characterized by the interplay of Islamic symbolism, nationalist rhetoric, anti-Western sentiment, and direct engagement with the populace, complemented by an assertive foreign policy that sought strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States, China, and regional actors.⁸ Khan's tenure elucidates the tensions inherent in populist governance, particularly in relation to institutional constraints and economic management, while his post-ousting political mobilization underscores the enduring resonance of his populist appeal.⁹ His trajectory constitutes a salient case study in the nexus of charismatic leadership, populist mobilization, and the interrelation of domestic political imperatives with foreign policy orientation.¹⁰

Research questions

- 1) How has populism evolved as a political ideology particularly its right-wing variant in Pakistan's current political landscape,

⁷ Abdullah Masood, 'The Role of Political Parties in Political Development of Pakistan: A Case Study of Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaf 2013-2022', M.Phil thesis, Session (2021-2023), Islamia University of Bahawalpur. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376480200_THE_ROLE_OF_POLITICAL_PARTIES_IN_POLITICAL_DEVELOPMENT_OF_PAKISTAN_A_CASE_STUDY_OF_PAKISTAN_TEHREEK-E-INSAF_2013-2022_Session_2021-2023

⁸ Fizza Batool, Ihsan Yilmaz, & Kainat Shakil, 'Contest between Leaders of the Ummah: Comparing Civilizational Populisms of PTI and TLP in Pakistan', *Populism & Politics (P&P)*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). 15 February 2023. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0020>

⁹ *The Guardian*, 'Pakistan Ex-PM Imran Khan Sentenced to 14 Years in Prison in Corruption Case', 17 January 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/17/pakistan-imran-khan-sentenced-prison-corruption-case>

¹⁰ *Financial Times*, 'Pakistan Court Sentences 108 Opposition Figures to 10 Years in Prison', 30 January 2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/d4fb35e0-7ea6-4f7c-afb3-de2c848a12af>

particularly in shaping narratives that emphasize a binary divide between ‘common people’ and ‘elites’?

- 2) How have historical populist movements shaped modern political ideologies and practices within Pakistan?
- 3) How did ideologically laden political slogans used by notable populist leaders within their party frameworks shape Pakistan's brand of populism?

Literature Review

Populism as Political Ideology: The genealogy of populism first originated in 1967 by a multidisciplinary group of mostly European experts held a conference at the London School of Economics, and the proceedings were later published in an edited volume.¹¹ Those early scholars viewed the emergence of global populism as an assortment of distinct events, including how they considered pre-modern politicians positioned in Africa, Asia, and ultimately communist Eastern Europe.¹²

Since populism is presently so pervasive in both academic and public discourse, it is crucial to define it before continuing with this paper. A political movement or party known as populism, especially its right-wing variant, emphasizes a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the ‘us’ refers to the ‘people’ who are usually defined in terms of ethnicity or community, and those who are perceived as fighting a zero-sum war against ‘them’ who are commonly defined as liberal elites, the establishment, minorities and immigrants.¹³

Moreover, the Populists claim to be democratic in their rhetoric, which is based on the idea that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests of the people, but

¹¹ Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). <https://www.scribd.com/document/407336692/Ionescu-and-Gellner-Populism-Its-Meanings-and-National-Characteristics>

¹² Julian Kuttig, ‘Populism in Conflict: Introduction to the Essay Series’, *Governance in Conflict Network (GIC Network)*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.gicnetwork.be/populism-and-conflict/>

¹³ J.A. Piazza, *Populism and Support for Political Violence in the United States: Assessing the Role of Grievances, Distrust of Political Institutions, Social Change Threat, and Political Illiberalism*, *Political Research Quarterly*, 77:1, 152 - 166 (2023), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/10659129231198248>

democracy is understood in majoritarian and illiberal terms.¹⁴ This paradox leads us to another important quality of populists their disdain for many of the basic norms and institutions of liberal democracy such as free speech, freedom of the press, recognition of the legitimacy of opposition, and acceptance of the separation of powers in general and limits on the executive in particular.¹⁵

The recent literature on Latin American populism explores its renewed impact on democracy, analyzing distinctions between contemporary and historical forms. Scholars debate definitions of populism, often seeing it as a rhetorical appeal to *'the people'* that sidesteps traditional democratic channels.¹⁶ While some, like Francisco Panizza, emphasize populist discourse as a mobilizing tool, others, like Carlos de la Torre, argue that it stimulates divisive governance that polarizes society.¹⁷

The studies by Kenneth Roberts and Kurt Weyland examine the effects of populism on party systems and policy, noting that populist regimes may destabilize traditional structures but often fail to deliver sustainable social policies. Case studies such as John Crabtree's on Bolivia reveal variations in populist approaches, showing some leaders, like Evo Morales, integrating social movements instead of imposing top-down control. Overall, the literature suggests that Latin America's social and economic challenges continue to fuel populist appeal, testing the adaptability of democratic institutions across the region.¹⁸

Cas Mudde¹⁹ Argues that populism, once peripheral to European politics until the 1990s, has become a dominant political force as structural changes drive public dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the neoliberal consensus. Mudde defines populism as a *'thin-centered ideology'*, distinguishing between the *'pure people'* and the *'corrupt elite'*

¹⁴ Sheri Berman, 'The Causes of Populism in the West', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24:1 (May 2021), 73, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102503>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://www2.daad.de/medien/mudde_rovira_kaltwasser_2017_populism.pdf

¹⁷ Jennifer N. Collins, 'Precarity and Hope in Contemporary Latin America', *Latin American Research Review*, 59:1 (2024), 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2024.21>.

¹⁸ Wilson Center, *Populism of the 21st Century*, Latin America Program, 8 October 2009, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/populism-the-21st-century>

¹⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *op.cit.*

and expressing discontent with the narrowing political landscape.²⁰ He suggests that populism, as an illiberal democratic reaction to perceived undemocratic liberalism, will continue to shape European politics and challenge the foundations of liberal democratic institutions.

The eminent historian Michael Kazin makes a strong case in his book *Populist Persuasion* that populism's strength comes from its versatility. Commentators across the political spectrum apply the label to groups and individuals who share one significant characteristic: they are successful in accusing 'elites' or 'the establishment' of undermining the interests and betraying the ideals of 'the people' in countries that are, at least formally, dedicated to democratic principles.²¹

Schmidtke²² contends that populist actors promise to restore democracy to its foundational ethos by re-empowering the people, constructing a narrative deeply rooted in popular sovereignty. Drawing on Schmitt's notion of the political, their rhetoric not only envisions democracy as an expression of the people's will but also frames an existential battle between a revitalized popular mandate and an unresponsive, technocratic establishment. In doing so, populist practice mobilizes a permanent state of exception, a crisis narrative that serves to delegitimize established institutions and justify radical departures from conventional democratic norms, thereby positioning the future trajectory of governance as contingent upon the reappropriation of power by the people.²³

By stressing many historical expressions of populism from Hugo Chávez to Donald Trump, the idea that it is a purely left or right political movement challenges the notion that populism is relatively new, with its origins traced back to the World Wars, Cold War and the collapse of Communism.²⁴ The significance of preserving social and political differentiation while preserving illiberal traits in all its historical

²⁰ Rabia Salim, Sadia Fayaz, and Fahad Mujahid, 'The Dynamics of Populism in Pakistan: Media, Military, and Religion', *Migration Letters*, 21:8 (2024), 617-24, <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/11339>

²¹ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1w0dcsq>

²² Oliver Schmidtke, 'The "Will of the People": The Populist Challenge to Democracy in the Name of Popular Sovereignty', *Social & Legal Studies*, 32:6 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231153124>

²⁴ Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017006846>

expressions is highlighted throughout the article, keeping Pakistan's domestic politics as a case study.

Types of Populism Prevalent in Pakistani Politics: To understand the types of populism prevalent in Pakistan, it is essential to define here that the Left-wing populists generally portray individuals who disagree with their political beliefs or mandate as enemies of the public. Whereas, right-wing populists link this intolerance of other political viewpoints to a perception of the populace that is based on national origin and ethnicity. To put it briefly, xenophobic sentiments are the features of right-wing populists. The most general Trans-historical aspects of the numerous populist ideas that downplay historical and ideological distinctions have been dismissed by most historians, who place more emphasis on the populist style than its content.²⁵

However, Regressive populism is fundamentally a deflection, sometimes encouraged by wealthy elites, to shift populist rage away from the real holders of power onto less powerful groups.²⁶ The deflection politics exacerbates differences in race and ethnicity that go underground in times the more equity and economic insecurity giving rise to both progressive populism and regressive populism. Progressive populism on the other hand focuses on how the rigged rules of the economy benefit billionaires and a few hundred transnational corporations.²⁷

Moreover, Right-Wing Populist (RWP) rhetoric positions leaders as defenders of a declining nation through authoritarian, nationalist, and anti-elite messaging, emphasizing national victimization and distrust of elites and globalism to garner domestic support while projecting hostile narratives internationally through aggressive statements, threats to exit institutions and hyper-nationalism framing previous elites as responsible for unfair international deals that exploit the nation.²⁸

²⁵ Jedediah Britton-Purdy, 'Populism's Two Paths', *The Nation*, 13 October 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-two-populisms/>

²⁶ Chuck Collins, *The Two Sides of Populism* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies), 10 November 2016. <https://ips-dc.org/two-sides-populism/>

²⁷ Chuck Collins, 'The Two Sides of Populism', *Institute for Policy Studies*, 10 November 2016, <https://ips-dc.org/two-sides-populism/>

²⁸ Minnie M. Joo, Brandon Bolte, Nguyen Huynh, Vineeta Yadav, and Bumba Mukherjee, 'Right-Wing Populist Leaders, Nationalist Rhetoric, and Dispute Initiation in International Politics', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 69, 2-3 (February 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241247041>

Yilmaz and Saleem²⁹ provides a historical analysis of religious populism in Pakistan, focusing on the intersection of nationalism, religion, and populist leadership.³⁰ The authors trace the transformation of Pakistan's ideological framework through successive political regimes and critical historical junctures. The evolution of Pakistan's religious identity since its inception, with its founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioning a secular polity. However, this pluralistic vision quickly gave way to constitutional Islamic symbolism, particularly through the Objectives Resolution (1949),³¹ which declared sovereignty belonging to Allah and laid the groundwork for a theocratic undercurrent in statecraft. Religious populism in Pakistan has become a significant part of the nation's cultural identity, especially during the country's fragile democratic phase.³² Religious parties and groups hold significant political sway, allowing them to nurture their own 'people' who are partisan towards 'others'. Weak governance, political volatility, and skepticism in institutional skills have encouraged the population to support religious populists. Pakistani populism is anti-elite by definition, uniting common people around the leader. However, different sections of the country interpret 'elite' differently, making it difficult to establish a unified national consensus on populism.³³

Whereas, Historians like Ayesha Jalal, Eugene Rogan, and political commentator Afshin Shahi discussed the issue of populism in the context of global democracy. They argued that populism has roots in the concepts of 'us and them' and emerged in the USA due to issues such as migrants, automation, inequality, and globalization. In the Muslim world, populism led to terrorism and created contradictions among people who

²⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, 'A Quest for Identity: The Case of Religious Populism in Pakistan', *European Center for Populism Studies*, 26 March 2021, <https://www.populismstudies.org/a-quest-for-identity-the-case-of-religious-populism-in-pakistan/>

³⁰ Fizza Batool, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Kainat Shakil, 'Contest Between Leaders of the Ummah: Comparing Civilizational Populisms of PTI and TLP in Pakistan', *European Center for Populism Studies*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.populismstudies.org/contest-between-leaders-of-the-ummah-comparing-civilizational-populisms-of-pti-and-tlp-in-pakistan/>

³¹ 'Jinnah's Political Struggle and Vision of Pakistan', *Business Recorder*, 25 December 2015. <https://fp.brecorder.com/2015/12/201512251258989/>

³² Ihsan Yilmaz, 'Civilizationist Populism in South Asia: Turning India Saffron', *European Center for Populism Studies*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/civilizationist-populism-in-south-asia-turning-india-saffron/>

³³ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, *op.cit.*

were contesting the root causes of their discontentment. Jalal highlighted the importance of history as a process of inspiration and dialogue with the past as crucial. Rogan argued that populism would not only fail but would ensure it is flopped, questioning the liberal order, established rules and institutions, democracy, and everything invented by the world like the World Bank and IMF.³⁴

Shahi emphasized that populism addresses the problems of people, particularly those related to globalization. He argued that populism could not resolve issues of countries with international links. He also cited the failure of capitalism, which led to inequality and the inability to address the problems faced by millions of people. Shahi also noted that popular movements in the 1960s and 70s focused on creating a better social reality, while Marxism promised a utopian society. However, populist movements in the 21st century were afraid of the future and focused on addressing the present reality.³⁵ He argued that all problems in the world were either subjective or objective and we cannot tackle populism without handling its prevalent symptoms.³⁶

While Shahi underscored the limitations of populism in addressing structural problems, this discussion also turns to the rhetorical tools that sustain it. One key instrument is the political slogan, which has evolved over time and been strategically employed by populist leaders in Pakistan to embed their narratives within party structures. These slogans, often built on broad generalizations, rely on pronouns to legitimize their ideology against opposing mandates. Drawing on Van Dijk's concept of 'Us' versus 'Them' metaphors, this article demonstrates how such slogans construct positive self-images while casting rivals negatively.³⁷ The analysis also considers how slogans are interpreted through the lens of

³⁴ Intikhab Hanif, 'Populism and its Perils', *Dawn*, 23 February 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1465495>

³⁵ Ayesha Jalal, 'The "Populist" Era and Its Aftermath in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, 1971 to c.1993', in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, Contemporary South Asia, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/democracy-and-authoritarianism-in-south-asia/populist-era-and-its-aftermath-in-india-pakistan-and-bangladesh-1971-to-c1993/AEA1F21C8CFF21019019E724925A3968>

³⁶ Intikhab Hanif, 'Populism and Its Perils', *Dawn*, 23 February 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1465495>

³⁷ Yusran Surya R, Jufri, and Usman, 'Issues of the 2024 Presidential Candidates in Online News Texts: Critical Discourse Analysis of the Teun A. Van Dijk Model', *Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Social Sciences Study*, 4:1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.47616/jamrsss.v4i1.358>

language and cultural context, presenting them chronologically according to the prevailing social, political, and economic issues during each leader's tenure³⁸ the use of slogans in Pakistani political discourse focuses on the link between power and ideology. It demonstrates that the language employed in slogans contains unseen ideologies that are conveyed and re-expressed through vocabulary choices with unique ideological implications. The linguistic structure of slogans affects listeners' imagination and perception, including transitivity analysis.³⁹ The slogans in the text reflect political party's ideology by using strategies such as 'actor' and 'patient' to accentuate some characters while diminishing others.⁴⁰ They act as ideological positioning tools, with positive power-based lexical choices projecting a positive image for one party and negative lexical choices projecting a bad image for the other. The idea is to develop an ideological attitude in which listeners sympathize with one party while rejecting the other parties.

From 'Joy Bangla' to 'Naya Pakistan': Populist Slogans That Shaped Electoral Identity in Pakistan: The slogans have been a significant factor in shaping Pakistan's electoral identity, as they condense broad political ideas into memorable words. From Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq's 1954 United Front campaign that used the slogan *Purba Bangla Shayottoshashon Koyem Koro* 'Establish autonomy for East Bengal'⁴¹ to frame self-government as an immediate and practical goal, questioning central control, and building a broad pan-Bengali movement.

³⁸ Hamed Hussain Shah, Javed Iqbal, and Arshad Mahmood, 'Ideological Underpinning of Political Slogans of Mainstream Political Parties of Pakistan: A Critical Discourse Analysis', *Global Social Sciences Review*, VII:III (2022), <https://gssrjournal.com/article/ideological-underpinning-of-political-slogans-of-mainstream-political-parties-of-pakistan-a-critical-discourse-analysis>

³⁹ Arina Isti'anah, 'Transitivity Analyses in Literary and Non-Literary Texts: for Truth and Meaning', *Research Gate*, March 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319502176_Transitivity_Analyses_in_Literary_and_non-Literary_Texts_for_Truth_and_Meaning

⁴⁰ Mehwish Malghani, Shabana Akhtar, and Farhat Farooqi, 'Analysis of Political Discourse in Pakistani Party Manifestos', *Global Social Sciences Review*, IV:II (2019), [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019\(IV-II\).30](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-II).30)

⁴¹ Amrit Mahotsav, 'Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq', *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 11 April 2023, <https://cmsadmin.amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?15927>.

Moulana Bhashani introduced *Swadhin Bangla Zindabad* ‘Long live Independent Bengal’⁴² in 1969, which marked the shift from seeking reform within Pakistan to demanding a separate state. This unambiguous call left no room for compromise and helped solidify grassroots support that would culminate in the 1971 Liberation War. With later, Liaquat Ali Khan’s 1964 election message, *Pakistan Aata Hai Sab Se Pehle* ‘Pakistan comes first, vote for its progress’⁴³ merged patriotic duty with electoral choice, demonstrating how slogans can influence historical memory and shape political debates. Fatima Jinnah’s 1965 campaign relied struggle for constitutional rule and in her rallies, she argued that, by coming to terms with India on the Indus Water dispute Pakistan had surrendered control of the rivers to India⁴⁴ which till date continues to disrupt the nation’s water security.⁴⁵

However, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s 1970 breakthrough focused on *Mangta Hai Har Insan, Roti Kapra Aur Makan* ‘Every person demands bread, clothing, and shelter’,⁴⁶ listing universal needs as basic rights. Later, Benazir Bhutto’s campaign fused legacy and renewal with refrains such as *Charon Sabun Ki Zanjeer, Benazir, Benazir!*⁴⁷ slogan declaring that Benazir could unite Pakistan’s diverse regions and ‘Benazir Brings Revolution’ chant promising sweeping change under her leadership illustrating how cultural elements can strengthen a slogan’s appeal.

In 2008, Asif Ali Zardari coined *Pakistan Khappay* ‘We want Pakistan’⁴⁸ as a unifying call amid national grief, asserting federal solidarity and continuity during a crisis. Lastly, Imran Khan rise in 2013 centered on *Tabdili* ‘Change’ and *Naya Pakistan* ‘New Pakistan’, targeting millennial electorates disillusioned by service failures in gas,

⁴² Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee, ‘“Joy Bangla”: The Making of a People’s Slogan’, *The Daily Star*, 26 March 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/joy-bangla-the-making-peoples-slogan-3575016>

⁴³ Peerzada Salman, ‘This Week 50 Years Ago: Fatima Jinnah’s Call’, *Dawn*, 29 December 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1153720>.

⁴⁴ Aalene Mahum Aneeq, ‘Gender, Dissent and the Afterlives of the Pakistan Movement: Fatima Jinnah in the 1965 Elections’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 47:3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2024.2344996>

⁴⁵ Hassaan F. Khan, ‘What India’s Indus Waters Treaty Suspension Means for Pakistan’, *Dawn*, 24 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906274>.

⁴⁶ Sama Faruqi, ‘Slogans and Songs: The Parties and Times That Made Them’, *Herald Magazine*, 20 August 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398628>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

electricity, and water. They demonstrated how slogans can adapt to new demographics leaving an enduring mark on Pakistan's electoral identity.

Discussion

Rise of Populism in Pakistan: The partition of British India in the 1940s gave the Muslim minority in South Asia a long-overdue political voice, and the Pakistan movement gained strength. When Pakistan gained its independence in August 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah decided to create a Muslim country rather than a theocracy, and democratic populism since then has subsequently influenced Pakistani politics.⁴⁹ While tracing the origin of Populism in Pakistan, it is important to consult its history and the role played by its resilient leaders against Feudalism, Hindu rulers, and the entrenched power of traditional economic elites.

The role of leaders like Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq of East Pakistan is usually neglected. He was the elected Prime Minister of Bengal, who held his position twice, and remained the PM for six years (1937-43). He is the first populist leader of Pakistan, popularly known as *Sher-e-Bangla* (the lion of Bengal). Haq was a seasoned political leader, a very charismatic, influential, and incessantly active figure in Bengal politics in the first half of the twentieth century. In his capacity, he controlled, guided, dominated, molded, and shaped Bengal politics for almost three decades and gave a new dimension to provincial politics by mobilizing the peasants and tenants and forming a political party known as the Krishak Praja Party (*KPP*) for their cause. His understanding of their problems and his earnest effort for the betterment of their living conditions made him very popular among the people, which altogether paved the way for success in the elections of 1937 and his coming to power in Bengal. He was perhaps the most widely acclaimed, accepted, and at the same time one of the most discussed, debated, controversial, and unpredictable Chief Ministers (then known as the Premiers under the Government of India Act, 1935) of undivided Bengal.⁵⁰ He was immensely popular among the masses due to his anti-elitism and the fight against the Hindu and Muslim proprietors.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, *op.cit.*

⁵⁰ Dhananjoy Bhattacharjee, A.K. *Fazlul Huq and Bengal Politics between the Two Partitions (1905-1947): Currents and Cross-Currents*, PhD diss., University of North Bengal, December 2017, <https://ir.nbu.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/2707/23/Full%20Thesis%20of%20Dhananjoy%20Bhattacharjee.pdf>

⁵¹ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, *op.cit.*

Another integral populist figure in East Pakistan was Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, widely recognized for his unwavering resistance to imperialism, feudalism, and institutional political subordination. Originating from Sirajganj, British India, the legacy of prior anti-colonial upheavals, particularly Titumir's revolts and the Sepoy Mutiny, had a tremendous impact on his intellectual upbringing.

Initially aligned with militant resistance, Bhashani later abandoned physical confrontation in favor of organized grassroots mobilization. His acute understanding of the exploitative relationship between colonial authorities and the landed nobility fueled his active participation in agrarian struggles. One of his first direct encounters occurred in Santosh, Tangail, when he disputed the authority of a local landlord. The colonial authority, seeing him as a threat, ordered his repeated removal from several areas, including Mymensingh and Pabna. This resulted in his exile from Bengal and subsequent transfer to Assam, where his activity continued with increased intensity. Bhashani rose to prominence in Assam as a strong champion for marginalized populations. He directed aversion to sociopolitical marginalization and feudal exploitation, earning broad admiration in places like Bhasan Char, where he sparked collective action against structural injustices. In 1917, he formed the Nationalist Party under Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, and in 1919 took on the Indian National Congress. Disillusioned by the Congress's incapacity to achieve the needs of rural masses, he shifted to the Muslim League and finally rose to the chair of its Assam Committee. He attended the important Lahore Conference in 1940 where he supported the idea of the formation of autonomous Muslim-majority governments.

Following the partition in 1947, he campaigned for an independent and united Bengal and Assam. Because of this stance, he was detained by Indian authorities under preventive security regulations. Fed up with the Muslim League's dominance in West Pakistan and its alliance with feudal interests, Bhashani broke from the party and founded the Awami Muslim League. This new political platform emphasized democratic government, socioeconomic justice, and populist measures. Between 1948 and 1971, he was instrumental in raising East Pakistan's democratic consciousness and incorporating secular ideas into its political setup. Bhashani was a prominent opponent of Pakistan's alignment with Western hegemonies, notably its strategic cooperation with the United States. He advocated for a non-aligned foreign policy and regional autonomy. These ideals were incorporated into the Jukta (United) Front's

21-Point Election Agenda in 1954⁵² demanding the recognition of Bangla as a state language alongside comprehensive socio-economic reforms expressing his vision of sovereignty and self-determination.⁵³

During the formative years of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan presented a seminal fiscal manifesto earmarked as the earliest populist economic policy. Crafted in the critical period preceding independence, his budget served not merely as a financial plan but as a politically strategic document aimed at challenging both the colonial system and the entrenched power of traditional economic elites. By removing excise and customs duties on salt, Khan issued a potent symbolic rejection of the exploitative taxation imposed by colonial rulers, a move that resonated deeply with marginalized segments of society who had long borne the brunt of such oppressive policies. Furthermore, his decision to raise the minimum annual income threshold for taxation from Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,500 was intended to ease the financial pressure on poorer citizens. This recalibration was supported by social justice ideals and Quranic teachings that opposed the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Khan's subsequent measures, such as the imposition of new taxes on business profits and capital gains and the doubling of the corporate tax rate, were designed to disrupt the traditional economic order by reducing the power of well-established capitalist groups. Despite incorporating these bold redistributive policies, Khan maintained strict fiscal discipline by keeping overall government expenditure under control. His *'Poor Man's Budget'* managed to finance vital public initiatives like agricultural enhancement and food subsidy programs while ensuring sustainable spending levels. This balanced approach between fiscal prudence and social equity not only mobilized popular support against dominant economic interests but also disrupted established business paradigms, paving the way for significant political realignments. Ultimately, Khan's strategic use of populist rhetoric and policy laid the groundwork for Pakistan's emergence as an independent state. His budget provided immediate relief to economically disadvantaged groups and set a lasting precedent influencing future

⁵² United Front Election & Historic 21-point Programme, *MUJIB 100: The Liberator – The History – The Celebration*, 14 June 2021, ALBD (Awami League Bangladesh), <https://www.albd.org/articles/general/36625/United-Front-Election-&-Historic-21-point-Programme>

⁵³ Siraz Uddin Sathi, 'Moulana Bhashani's Anti-Imperialist & Anti-Expansionist Politics', *The South Asia Journal*, 11 December 2021, <https://southasiajournal.net/moulana-bhashanis-anti-imperialist-anti-expansionist-politics/>.

leaders who would continue to champion the cause of the common people against the entrenched elite.⁵⁴

Moreover, Left-wing populism in United Pakistan gained momentum when figures such as Mujibur Rahman in East Pakistan and Bhutto in West Pakistan rallied against the established elite. Both Mujib and Bhutto rejected the constitution and political culture of that time and vowed to create a new nation with the help of the masses. Both claimed that the '*people*' were with them and those on the opposite side were opposed to the people. Both were left-wing populists who thought socialism would restore power to the masses for the first time since 1947. Populism was not something new for East Pakistan. In West Pakistan, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto broached mass politics. As they upended the politics in different ways, it eventually separated the former from the latter in 1971, as Bengali people also struggled against an oppressive army at that time.⁵⁵

Following the devastating defeat in the war that led to East Pakistan's secession, the Pakistani military retreated, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was chosen Prime Minister by the first directly elected national legislature. Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party (PPP) were elected on a populist platform that included aspects of Islamism and socialism. Bhutto used the phrase 'Islamic socialism' and asserted that socialism and Islam could coexist in the new political structure. However, he was later obliged to make concessions due to the growing popularity of the religious right, which promoted religious populism against the non-Islamic Bhutto administration. The 1973 Constitution proclaimed Islam as the national

⁵⁴ Harish Damodaran, 'The Most Populist of All Budgets, by the Man Who Would Become First Pakistan PM', *The Indian Express*, 28 January 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-most-populist-of-all-budgets-by-the-man-who-would-become-first-pak-pm-8408328/>

⁵⁵ Anam Zakaria, 'Remembering the War of 1971 in East Pakistan', *Al Jazeera*, 16 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/16/remembering-the-war-of-1971-in-east-pakistan>; Jean-Robert Raviot, *Putinism: A Praetorian System?*, Notes de l'Ifri (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 2018), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/rnv_106_raviot_putinism_praetorian_system_2018.pdf; Muhammad Imran Alvi and Asia Saif, 'From Theory to Reality: Understanding the Roots of Praetorianism and Its Pervasive Implications for Pakistan's Socio-Political Landscape', *Russian Law Journal*, 7 April 2023, <https://russianlawjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/3037>;

religion and declared both the President and Prime Minister of the country to be Muslims.⁵⁶

Bhutto subsequently set the date for the second national election in 1977. With the PPP the only successful national party in the country, nine opposition parties established the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) and pledged to run together. Bhutto and his associates planned an election strategy that included using the Federal Security Force (FSF) to intimidate the opposition because they were afraid of the PNA's potential power. However, PNA members refused to be intimidated and centered their attacks on Bhutto and the PPP by running on a particularly religious platform. Arguing that Bhutto had betrayed Islamic practices, the PNA called for a cleansing of the body politic and a return to the basic tenets of Islamic performance. The PNA, despite its efforts, was soundly defeated in the election, but the polling had not been without incident.⁵⁷ Protests in major cities led the army to disband Bhutto's administration and detain him despite the election results. Zia Ul-Haq announced a fair and transparent election, but the army did not allow Bhutto to return to power, ending the Bhutto period and introducing Zia Ul-Haq's praetorianismⁱ. Zia Ul Haq's actions contradicted his original promise to restore civilian control, leading to political unrest in Pakistan.⁵⁸ This resulted in a shift from the regressive populism of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto towards praetorianism by Zia Ul Haq, leaving Pakistan amidst the political turmoil.⁵⁹

The early post-independence period also saw increasing reliance on Islamic identity as a unifying force amid ethnic and linguistic fragmentation. General Ayub Khan initially resisted religious populism but later appropriated Islamic rhetoric to delegitimize political opponents like Fatima Jinnah, whereas Ms. Jinnah emerged as an emblematic figure in Pakistan's democratic evolution, epitomizing the characteristics of a populist leader during her unprecedented campaign in the 1965

i, Praetorianism refers to the military's excessive involvement in domestic politics, first coined in the 1960s by Maurice Duverger and Samuel Huntington. This term describes political systems that combine democracy with authoritarian practices, with the military often exerting influence or intervention in the political process.

⁵⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, *op.cit.*

⁵⁷ Sameel Ahmed Qureshi, 'An Analysis of Contemporary Pakistani Politics: Bhutto versus the Military', *Asian Survey*, 19:9 (1979), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643811>.

⁵⁸ Shahid Javed Burki and Lawrence Ziring, 'Pakistan', *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan#ref990243>

⁵⁹ Iftikhar H. Malik, 'Pakistan at 75: Grappling with Praetorianism and Populism', *The Round Table*, 111:6 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2148910>

presidential elections. She emerged as a symbol of national resistance, galvanizing support from a broad cross-section of Pakistani society, including labor unions, diaspora communities, and marginalized groups. Her correspondence archive, replete with letters from both domestic and overseas Pakistanis, evidences her deep-rooted populist appeal. Ms. Jinnah effectively unified divergent ethnic, religious, and regional factions under a singular nationalist vision. Her candidacy was endorsed not only by Western political elites but also by Eastern factions, notably the Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Her populist momentum was institutionalized through the Combined Opposition Parties (COP),⁶⁰ a coalition that functioned as a vehicle for popular mobilization against the entrenched military regime. By integrating sovereign actors, common citizens, and collective national sentiment, her campaign constituted a holistic populist movement.

Despite her defeat, her campaign catalyzed a democratic awakening, reinvigorating civil society, initiating political discourse, and inspiring future populist trajectories, particularly that of Benazir Bhutto. In 1977, following the military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq and the subsequent political upheaval that culminated in the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979, Benazir Bhutto partakes in Pakistan's struggle for democracy. Her political trajectory exemplified a distinct form of populism, characterized by mass appeal, charismatic leadership, and a deep connection with the disenfranchised segments of society. Assuming co-leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) alongside her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, she inherited not only her father's political mantle but also his ideological commitment to democratic governance and social justice. Bhutto's populist appeal was grounded in her ability to personify both modern aspirations and traditional values. Her public persona as a Muslim woman wearing a white dupatta while articulating progressive political ideals enabled her to transcend sociocultural boundaries and resonate with a wide cross-section of the Pakistani populace. She drew substantial support from rural communities, women, and the working class by advocating for democratic restoration, civil liberties, and the alleviation of socioeconomic disparities. In 1981, Bhutto played a leading role in the formation of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD),⁶¹ a

⁶⁰ Sana Zaheer and Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, 'The Iron Lady: Assessing the Fatima Jinnah's Role against Ayub Khan's Dictatorship', *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4:1 (2023). [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023\(4-1\)28](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-1)28)

⁶¹ Muhammad Aslam and Saeed Ahmed Rid, 'Sindh's Participation in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in Pakistan (1981-

coalition of diverse political parties united against military rule. The MRD's mobilization, particularly in Sindh, underscored her capacity to galvanize mass movements and position herself as a voice of the oppressed. Her sustained resistance to authoritarianism, including extended periods of imprisonment and political exile, reinforced her image as a leader willing to endure personal sacrifice for the nation's democratic future. Upon her return to Pakistan on 10 April 1986, Bhutto was greeted by an unprecedented public reception, symbolizing her deep-rooted populist legitimacy. Despite facing repression, including detention on 14 August 1986, her political momentum continued to grow. Her rhetoric emphasized anti-elitism, national redemption, and democratic empowerment, aligning closely with populist narratives.⁶²

During her two tenures as Prime Minister, from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996, Bhutto implemented policies reflecting her populist ethos. She focused on expanding access to education, enhancing women's participation in governance, and initiating social welfare programs aimed at uplifting marginalized communities. Her administration sought to integrate women into state institutions such as the police and judiciary, and to create economic opportunities for the poor. These initiatives not only addressed structural inequities but also reinforced her connection with the masses. Benazir Bhutto's political legacy, shaped by resilience, sacrifice, and an enduring rapport with the people, situates her as one of Pakistan's foremost populist leaders one whose life and career were inextricably linked to the democratic aspirations of the nation.⁶³

In the post-9/11 context and populist radicalization generated internal tensions, with groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) using populist Islamist rhetoric to define the state as corrupt and impious. Giving rise to contemporary religious populism emerge in the form of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-

1988)', *Progressive Research Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 3:2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.51872/prjah.vol3.Iss2.175>

⁶² Muhammad Azeem, 'Revisiting Benazir Bhutto and Her Contribution to Restore Democracy in Pakistan', *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 5:2 (April–June 2024), [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024\(5-II-S\)31](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024(5-II-S)31)

⁶³ Nazish Memon, Faraz Ali Bughio, and Illahi Bakhsh, 'Critical Analysis of Political Discourse: A Study of Benazir Bhutto's Last Speech', *Balochistan Journal of Linguistics*, Vol.2 (2014), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311206068_Critical_Analysis_of_Political_Discourse_A_Study_of_Benazir_Bhutto's_Last_Speech.

e-Insaf (PTI) party⁶⁴ drawn from the ideological legacy of Zia, while repackaging it for a modern, digitally connected electorate.

The religious populism has gradually become embedded in Pakistan's collective memory, shaping policy and public consciousness. Historical figures, events, and slogans have been selectively remembered or forgotten to construct a singular Islamic identity, erasing the pluralistic and South Asian identity that once defined the country's political identity.⁶⁵

Key Findings: Pakistan's unique populism reveals that elected populists pose a significant threat to democracy, unlike dictators who use coups to seize power.⁶⁶ This has led scholars to label our era the 'age of populism', highlighting the urgency of understanding the root causes of this wave. Pakistan's version of populism remains a complex phenomenon that appears to have been adopted rather than organically developed.

The erosion of faith in electoral integrity further complicates prospects for meaningful reform and accountability, posing long-term risks to Pakistan's democratic future and the welfare of its citizens. The cyclical nature of political maneuvering marked by inability of civilian government to understand that existing system has failed and continues to hinder the development of a responsive and accountable governance framework, leaving the populace vulnerable amid persistent socio-economic challenges.⁶⁷

Pakistan's political history has been laid out by different populist leaders, each with a unique style of governance. Early leaders like Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani sought to

⁶⁴ C. Christine Fair and Shaun Gregory, 'A State in Flux: Pakistan in the Context of National and Regional Change', *Contemporary South Asia*, 20:2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2012.670206>

⁶⁵ Mahnoor Mansoor and Rana Eijaz Ahmad, 'Institutional Overlapping and the Rise of Political Populism in Pakistan', *Lahore Mirror*, 19 April 2022, <https://lahoremirror.com/institutional-overlapping-and-the-rise-of-political-populism-in-pakistan/>.

⁶⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2018), <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Levitskyl-Ziblatt-How-Democracies-Die-2018-1.pdf>

⁶⁷ Ayesha Jalal, 'Inside Pakistan's Deeply Flawed Election', *Journal of Democracy*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/inside-pakistans-deeply-flawed-election/>.

empower the underprivileged, notably in East Pakistan, by criticizing the feudal system and campaigning for peasant rights.⁶⁸

As Pakistan's first Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan⁶⁹ pursued a more systematic approach to populism, emphasizing economic changes that would disrupt the colonial economic order. His 1947 fiscal manifesto focused on wealth redistribution, with policies like as taxes on commercial earnings and capital gains aimed at reducing the power of entrenched elites. However, political unrest throughout his reign hampered the full implementation of his vision, limiting the long-term impact of his populist program.⁷⁰

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became the face of populism in the 1970s, promising nationalization, land reforms, and social welfare under the iconic phrase '*roti, kapra, aur makaan*' (food, clothes, shelter).⁷¹ Bhutto's populist policies aimed to solve socioeconomic inequities and uplift the working class, but his later centralized leadership and deals with religious leaders hampered his legacy.⁷²

When competing for presidency in 1965, Fatima Jinnah used a distinct kind of populism by advocating democracy, which directly opposed Ayub Khan's autocratic leadership. Despite her failure, her campaign helped to advance the conversation on political freedom by establishing her as a representative of women's empowerment and democratic principles in Pakistan.⁷³

Another type of populism that combined Islamic nationalism and authoritarian governance was brought by Zia-ul-Haq. By appealing to

⁶⁸ Ihsan Yilmaz and Raja M. Ali Saleem, *op.cit.*

⁶⁹ Azhar Hassan Nadeem, *Pakistan: The Politics of the Misgoverned* (London: Routledge India, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429328282>

⁷⁰ 'Finance Ministers Who Shaped India's Economy', *The Economic Times*, 14 January 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance-ministers-who-shaped-indias-economy/liaquat-ali-khan-1946-1947-interim-government/slideshow/67521580.cms>.

⁷¹ Ravi Kalia, ed., *Pakistan: From the Rhetoric of Democracy to the Rise of Militancy* (London: Routledge India, 2011), <https://www.routledge.com/Pakistan-From-the-Rhetoric-of-Democracy-to-the-Rise-of-Militancy/Kalia/p/book/9781138659889>.

⁷² Kashif Ali, 'Dawn 75 Years of Independence of Pakistan', Academia.edu, accessed 30 January 2025, https://www.academia.edu/89335953/Dawn_75_Years_of_Independence_of_Pakistan.

⁷³ Omaer Naeem, *Imagination, Performance, Expression: Unraveling Global Pakistani Identity* (Senior Honors Thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 26 April 2024), https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1072&context=undergrad_etd.

religious groups and stifling political opposition, he established himself as a champion of Pakistan's Islamic identity and increased his authority. Top-down control and an appeal to traditional values were hallmarks of his populism.⁷⁴

Benazir Bhutto rose to prominence as a populist advocate for democracy, women's rights, and poverty reduction in the 1990s, carrying on her father's legacy. Despite charges of corruption and political incompetence throughout her tenure in power, which damaged her reputation as a populist, her progressive views on social problems however transcended.⁷⁵

Furthermore, Imran Khan's populism in the 2010s was based on anti-corruption rhetoric and the promise of a Naya Pakistan.⁷⁶ His populism capitalised on young people's disenchantment with the existing political establishment to appeal to them in particular. However, the failure of his administration to implement meaningful economic changes raised questions about the viability of his populist pledges.

Conclusion

Populism in Pakistan has evolved as a response to deep-rooted crises of representation, governance, and socio-economic inequality, with right-wing variants drawing on religious and ethnic narratives to construct a binary between 'the people' and 'the elites.' Its earliest manifestations appeared in Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq's mobilization of East Bengal peasants against feudal dominance, followed by Moulana Bhashani's grassroots campaigns that linked agrarian justice with anti-imperialism. Liaquat Ali Khan's 'Poor Man's Budget' articulated economic populism by taxing commercial profits while easing the burden on ordinary citizens, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto expanded this trajectory through Islamic socialism, pro-poor reforms, and the iconic slogan of 'roti, kapra, aur makaan.' Fatima Jinnah's 1965 campaign represented populism's democratic and gendered dimensions by contesting authoritarianism and advocating women's empowerment, whereas Benazir Bhutto fused

⁷⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, Zahid S. Ahmed, Galib Bashirov, Nicholas Morieson, and Kainat Shakil, 'Islamist Populists in Power: Promises, Compromises and Attacks on Democratic Institutions', *Populism & Politics*, European Center for Populism Studies, 7 August 2022. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0013>.

⁷⁵ Zebunnisa Burki, 'PPP: From Resistance to Pragmatism', *Geo TV*, 3 February 2024, <https://www.geo.tv/amp/529592-ppp-from-resistance-to-pragmatism>

⁷⁶ Asma Faiz, 'We Are on the Same Page: The Curious Case of Imran Khan's Populism in Pakistan', *Contemporary Populists in Power*, ed. Thomas Posado (Cham: Springer, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84079-2_4

populist discourse with education, welfare, and inclusive governance. More recently, Imran Khan has recast populism through anti-status quo narratives, Islamic moralism, and anti-corruption discourse, employing mass mobilization and digital outreach to transform PTI into a dominant political force, culminating in his 2018 premiership and continued resonance after his ouster.

Taken together, these trajectories illustrate how populism in Pakistan has persistently intertwined moral, economic, and nationalist appeals, shifting from agrarian struggles to Islamic socialism and, most recently, digital-age mobilization. While it has empowered marginalized groups and challenged entrenched elites, its long-term promise lies not in the repetition of slogans but in structural reforms through an upgraded political and institutional system capable of delivering sustainable governance and inclusive development for all.