

POPULIST TRENDS IN 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN

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Emergence of populism in 21st century poses a threat to a number of states including Pakistan. Populism always managed to exist in the history of international politics in various forms but the recent wave of populism is more impactful than previous ones as the 21st century politics is all about 'Identity Politics'. Recent populist wave emerged in Pakistan is believed to be the right-wing populism like populist trends in Western Europe, US, Turkey and India. This right-wing populism is exclusionary in nature and leads toward a polarization and radicalization of politics and society by generating the idea of 'Us vs Them' and emphasizing upon 'Good vs Bad'. In the case of Pakistan, the recent populist trend started to emerge in response to the failure of conventional political Set-up. The rising populist party, PTI, claimed to redress the grievances of masses and marginalized groups by flourishing democracy but once they came into power, their political approach deepened the already existing fissures by augmenting polarization and radicalization. Pakistani society is already fragmented at multiple levels including ethnicity, culture, language, economy and also experiencing a religious radicalization since 1970s. Geo-strategic location of Pakistan is also sensitive in the presence of tough immediate neighbors. So, Pakistan cannot bear the brunt of any populist experiment in recent scenario, especially in relation to the right-wing populist ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Populism refers to a thin-centered ideology that is usually associated with anti-establishment and anti-political sentiments. Populist leaders promise to redress the grievances of people by tacking back the power from the elite. Populist leaders tend to challenge the conventional political set-up in liberal democracies (Mueller, 2019 vol.45) . Rise of populism in a number of regions leads toward political polarization and radicalization. Populism generates political polarization which ultimately turns into radicalization. Political polarization takes place when a disagreement is seen between people and the elite on political issues and public policies (Russo, 2021, vol.48). Disagreement on policies and

issues creates a rift between elite and common people that provides the populist leaders with a justified cause to challenge the already established system. As far as ideological spectrum of populism is concerned, it is mainly divided between left-wing and right-wing populism. Both have some common characteristics like a strong critique on elite and an extraordinary sympathy towards people. Both left and right-wing populists are radical in nature and propound anti-establishment sentiments and objectives (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015).

Despite having a common core (radicalism), there are a number of differences between the attributes of left and right-wing populists. Left-wing populists

associate themselves with economic concerns and relate with class system. These left-wing populists are aligned with Marxist perspective and focus on economic development and egalitarianism. On the other hand, right-wing populists focus on the elements of nativism, culture, religion and nationalism. Left-wing populists believe in inclusivity while the right-wing populists propagate the element of exclusivity (Huber & Schimpf, 2017, Vol.5) . Emergence of populist leaders have been seen in a number of regions which depicts a potential challenge for a number of states. Rise of populism in Europe is believed to be the product of multiple factors including the role of EU and the economic crisis of 2008. With the emergence of EU, a number of important political and economic decisions started being made by this organization. This phenomenon produced a sense of dissatisfaction among the people of Europe belonging to different states. It is also believed that the undemocratic role of EU produced a resentment in people belonging to different states and generated a vacuum for the resurgence of populism in Europe (Browne, Rohac, & Kenney, 2018) . Among non-western region the major populist countries include China, Russia and India. These populists do not propose solutions for existing problems in international institutions but they are in an effort to replace these international institutions (Wajner, Destradi, & Zurn, 2024).

Populism is not restricted only to a particular region but a number of countries have been facing this menace including Pakistan. In the political history of Pakistan, populism managed to exist during the tenure of different leaders, mainly including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq. Era of Bhutto mostly reflects the characteristics of a left-wing populist leader. He is appreciated for the formulation of constitution of 1973, formation of Economic coordination committee and Council of common interest. He focused on structural and economic development and introduced nationalization policy and land reforms (Mehmud, 2021) . After Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the era of Zia-ul-Haq started, who is famous for his Islamization. In order to Islamize the whole state structure and society, Zia worked in collaboration with right-wing religious parties and launched a movement against democratic government of Bhutto. He established Federal

Shariat Courts, introduced Hudood Ordinance, promoted Madrassa Culture and made an emphasis on Jihad. All these measures reflect his right-wing populist approach which changed the contours of Pakistani politics and society by leaving a great deal of negative impacts on both politics and society (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2021). Current wave of populism in Pakistan resides with the narrative of PTI. PTI propagated this populist movement on moral and religious basis. Its moral dimension is reflected in PTI's movement against corruption carried out against PPP and PML-N, and religious dimension of its agenda is evident in PTI's aim of establishing Riasat-e-Madina in 100 days (Faiz, 2022) . The huge popularity of PTI in the recent years is the consequence of the failures of conventional politicians and their political setup that remained ineffective to address the grievances of people. PTI exhibited a sympathy towards masses and gained their support by promising them the solutions and using the rhetoric of Islam (Yilmaz & Shakil, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf; Pakistan's Iconic Populist Movement, 2021).

Literature Review

Populists create a divide between the people and elite by labelling 'Pure People' and 'Corrupt Elite'. They convince people on waging a war against the power wielding elite on moral grounds. Populist ideology involves four crucial elements including people, with morality, wage a war, against the corrupt elite (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019) . Populists have a tendency to create a binary between people and elite. They materialize their political concerns by creating a social binary opposition. All the populists rely on the power of speech and articulate a strong narrative against elite. They show an immediate relation or association with common people in order to gain their trust (Rastogi, 2021) . Populist rhetoric is usually replete with emotions, sentiments and idealism. Populist movement either right or left cannot be devoid of emotions and idealism, they exhibit an emotional and sentimental relation with the people suffering from insecurities, grievances and resentment against the ruling ones (Salmela, Scheve, & Nguyen, 2018).

Both left and right-wing populists are radical at core and primarily give same narrative of 'pure people'

and 'corrupt elite', but at secondary level there are differences in their approaches. Leftist populists associate themselves with economic concerns of people, they articulate narratives against elite in relation to their economic and fiscal policies and represent the economic and social interests of minorities. On the other hand, right-wing radicals concentrate on the element of nativism, culture, religion and nationalism. They associate themselves with native and cultural concerns of people and perceive people from other regions as a threat to the culture and values of the natives (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). This is evident from Islamophobia, anti-immigrant policies and protectionism in US and Western Europe.

In the political history of Pakistan, traces of both left and right-wing populist politics are found. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto emerged as a strong populist leader and campaigned class-consciousness. Bhutto stood against the Industrialists, feudal class and the elite by associating himself to the people suffering from economic deprivations (Abbasi, Abbasi, & Anwar, 2020). Bhutto proposed an anti-western agenda and depicted a special association with the Muslim countries in relation to his foreign policy. After Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto the other eminent populist leader in the history of Pakistan was Zia-ul-Haq, who is believed to be a right-wing populist. Zia-ul-Haq used the element of religion and focused on the Islamization of society. Zia's Islamization was not purely intended to propagate religion but it had certain social, political and economic motives. He legitimized his regime by using the rhetoric of religion. This Islamization of state and society depicts the characteristics of right-wing populism. This Islamization by Zia engendered the element of extremism in society with its deeply devastating impacts (Khan, 2020).

In the recent scenario, politics of Imran Khan purely exhibits the traits of a right-wing populist leader. A number of similarities are found in the political practices of Zia and Imran Khan on one hand, and on the other hand there are some commonalities in the populist approach of Recep Tayyip Erdogan [President of Turkey] and Imran Khan (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). The politics of Imran Khan bought a ray of hope for the people of Pakistan, he made an endeavor to end the dynastic politics in Pakistan. He

tried to transform a number of conventional things by adopting some instant measures in economic, political and social spheres. His vote bank mostly consisted of youth who were enthusiastic enough to bring a change in country. Things rapidly started to damage with the impact of COVID-19, as it left extreme negative impacts on the economy of the country. On the other hand, after gaining a popularity PTI started interfering in the judiciary which undermined the role of an independent judiciary. PTI government also tried to suppress and control media and things started not to work out in the favor of PTI. PTI started exhibiting authoritative features by interfering in institutions which is against the spirit of democracy. Populist movement of PTI created a deep divide in society in relation to political opinions which engendered a deep political polarization (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023).

Populism is perceived as a threat to all liberal democracies including Pakistan. Geo-politically, culturally and economically Pakistan is no position to handle a populist regime, especially a right-wing populist. Geo-politically, Pakistan is a sensitive state by being in geographic proximity to China, Russia and India (Talbot, 2012). From its inception, Pakistan has been facing a number of challenges including strategic, diplomatic and the economic ones. Its geo-strategic location offers it with numerous opportunities and simultaneously put a security challenge on the state (Rana, 2021). After the inception of Pakistan, a number of concrete issues emerged between the two newly born states including the division of Punjab and Bengal along with Kashmir conflict (Sattar, 2010). Besides the element of insecurity at eastern borders, Pakistan as a state has not been experiencing healthy terms at western borders with Afghanistan and Iran. All the immediate neighbors of Pakistan except China pose a challenge to her national security (Khan F. H., 2005).

When it comes to society, it is a known fact that Pakistani society is heterogenous in nature and already suffering from a number of conflicts. Complex ethnic identities in Pakistan do not exist in isolation but these identities manifest themselves in relation to certain political and economic conflicts. These ethnic communities reveal a solidarity on regional basis and demand political and economic

rights on ethnic basis. Elite of this country already seems fail in developing a social contract among all ethnic groups and propagate a culture of pluralism (Qadeer, 2006) . In this scenario, it is highly intimidating to support a populist leader when there are already a number of vertical and horizontal conflicts in society.

Research Questions

- 1- Which factors are responsible for the emergence of Populism in 21st century?
- 2- Why the current wave of populism is considered as a threat to Pakistan?

Research Objectives

- 1- To analyze the factors responsible for the emergence of populism in 21st century
- 2- To examine the fact that why current wave of populism in Pakistan is considered a threat

Material and Methods

Populism is believed to be a threat to all liberal democracies because of its anti-establishment and anti-political approach. It has been posing a threat to Pakistan in a number of ways. This research follows qualitative methods including descriptive and explanatory methods of inquiry. Content analysis of the speeches of various populist leaders has been conducted by using deductive approach. An endeavor has been made to comprehensively understand the current wave of populism and the challenges it has been generating for Pakistan.

Discussion and Analysis

Rise of populism in the 21st century initiates a debate among political scientists and analysts because of its immense popularity and irresistible impacts. Certain flaws in a democratic system are responsible in giving birth to populism because it thrives in the regions where people are dissatisfied with the policies and exhibit a resentment against their governments or the ruling ones. a disagreement between the ruling elite and people creates a vacuum. The deeper the vacuum, the higher the chances for a populist leader to fill the gap by articulating the narratives showing a sympathy with people. Populist rhetoric is usually filled with emotional speeches to stir the sentiments of already deprived people. Populists manifest an

extraordinary concern towards the problems of people in order to win their trust. Populists divide the society between 'Good vs Bad' or 'Corrupt Elite' vs 'Pure People'. This binary opposition created by the populists can be vertical, horizontal or both. They create a divide between ruling elite and the ruled masses, or generate trust deficit among various groups of society. Populists purely operates on the idea of binary opposition and deliberately ignore a middle path or do not believe in a moderate opinion. They do not go for the solution of problems in existing system but directly propose alternate system which exhibits their authoritarian approach and quest for power.

There is an inevitable relation between populism, polarization and radicalization. Populism generates political polarization, and this polarization ultimately turns into radicalization which damages the fabric of society. Existence of populists in the political history of world is seen in different forms of government including fascism, communism and socialism, but now in the 21st century, these populist leaders have started to appear even in democracies. In the 21st century, rise of populism in democracies is even associated with the failure of liberal democracies in rendering their people effectively. This is evident in the case of Western Europe and US, where democratic leaders seem incapable to deliver and people show a dissatisfaction and resentment toward their leaders. This phenomenon is also present in a number of 3rd world democracies other than West. In the 21st century a number of states have been facing the menace of identity politics. This identity politics creates a deep divide in society among various groups and damages the core of society. In this scenario, populism becomes a dual threat because it stimulates the phenomenon of identity politics. Right-wing populists do not stimulate the identity politics only but there is also a consensus on the fact that identity politics is the product of right-wing populism in many a cases.

Populist ideology is further divided into left-wing and right-wing approach. Both these approaches share the common core [radicalism], but their secondary characteristics and concerns are different. Element of anti-establishment, anti-elitism, radicalism and authoritarianism are common in both wings but their approaches and means to materialize their

objectives are different. Left-wing populism is associated with economic concerns of people and highlight the class system in society. It propagates an egalitarian approach and fight for the cause of economically underprivileged people. Usually, communists and socialists are included in the category of left-wing populists. Left-wing populism is inclusionary in nature because its only concern is to secure the socio-economic rights of people regardless of their color, creed, culture or language. On the other hand, right-wing populism is related to the element of nationalism, religion, culture, race etc. Right-wing populists divide people both vertically and horizontally. Right-wing populists are exclusionary in nature because they divide people in the name of nationalism, religion, culture and ethnicity. Those who are different from them in religion, culture or nationality are seen as 'others' and always perceived as a threat to their identity. On comparing the characteristics of both left and right-wing populism, it is observed that right-wing populism is comparatively more dangerous than left-wing populism. Right-wing populism creates divide both horizontally [between various groups of society] and vertically [between elite and the common people] in comparison to the left-wing which creates a vertical divide [between elite and the common people].

In recent scenario, Pakistan is one of the countries who have been currently engaged in populist politics. Political narratives established by PTI reflects a strong populist tendency and leading the society towards political polarization which has been giving rise to a number of internal and external challenges for the state. Though PTI is not the only populist party in Pakistan, in the political history of Pakistan the tradition of populism already existed. Even the challenges posed by the recent populist party finds a connectivity to the populist movements in the past. Struggle movement of Pakistan is also believed to be a populist movement. Independence movement of Pakistan was primarily based on the element of religion. So, religion became a sacred as well as a sensitive entity right after the inception of the country. Later on, from the political history of Pakistan, the two most eminent populists include Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq. These two leaders are considered most eminent populists

because their populist policies left a deep impact on state and society by changing the dynamics of state and society in a number of ways.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto emerged as an iconic leader in the political history of Pakistan. People used to be fascinated from the charismatic appearance of Bhutto to his populist rhetoric. Bhutto concentrated on a lot of areas including social, political and economic development. In the domain of politics, formulation of 1973 constitution is considered a mile stone. He is also appreciated for the establishment of Council of Common Interest and Economic Coordination Committee. Bhutto started a movement against the industrialists and feudal lords by introducing the policy of nationalization and land reforms. Bhutto being a socialist focused on the socio-economic development of the people and exhibited the features of left-wing populist. Bhutto's political and socialist reforms were not devoid of flaws but he earned an immense popularity. The other side of Bhutto's populist politics was his anti-western rhetoric, stance on Qadiani issue and alliance with Muslim countries in foreign policy. He exhibited an alliance with Muslim states on different forums and also raised a voice on Kashmir issue in United Nations. These populist measures of Bhutto reflect a right-wing approach. So, the populist era of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto offers a combination of both left and right-wing features. On a deeper investigation, it can be seen that populist ideology of Bhutto is primarily dominated by the left-wing characteristics with a slight touch of right-wing populist features.

After Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the other eminent populist leader in the political history of Pakistan is General Zia-ul-Haq. The era of Zia is considered the most sensitive and crucial era in the history of Pakistan. It was the era when Pakistan had been witnessing a number of challenges on external fronts including War in Afghanistan and Iranian revolution. Russian invasion in Afghanistan left a great impact and changed the contours of Pakistani politics and society. General Zia-ul-Haq supported the US in war against Russians through his 'Jihad' movement. This was an ideological war between the two major powers in which Pakistan was sandwiched. All the political developments took place in the era of Zia were not independent but defined in relation to the development in Afghan war. In order to propagate

the 'Jihad' movement, Zia-ul-Haq Islamized the state institutions and society. All the political, social and economic measures taken by Zia manifested in his agenda of Islamization. His eminent developments include the establishment of Sharia Court, Hudood Ordinance, Islamic Banking etc. His support for Taliban and anti-Soviet agenda also manifested a connectivity with religion. Zia-ul-Haq tried to ensure the practice of Islam by introducing certain punishments and rewards in connection to the practice of religion. Zia Islamized the whole curriculum by adding more Islamic content in the form of Islamic Studies and particular Surahs of Holy Quran.

This policy of Islamization represents the features of right-wing populism, and this Islamization entirely changed the socio-political contours of the country. During this era, Sunni-Shia conflict started to emerge in Pakistan and society begins to become deeply-divided along religious lines. Madrassa culture and Kalashnikov culture also emerged in this era as an impact of 'Jihad' movement. Zia's effort to Islamize society killed the essence of democracy, modernity and liberalism and replaced these elements with regression, conservatism and authoritarianism. So, the overall developments took place in the era of Zia reflect the policies of a purely right-wing populist who used the element of religion in order to maintain his rule.

The current wave of populism in Pakistan is reflected in the political narrative of Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaf. People are driven by the charismatic leadership of Imran Khan. In relation to Khan's charismatic personality to his populist rhetoric a glimpse of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto can be seen. On the other hand, Khan finds a similarity with Zia when it comes to the element of religion in his politics. Before coming into federal government, PTI established government in KPK. PTI enjoys the largest vote bank in country, especially it has the support of youth. After winning the election in 2018, PTI was believed to be a ray of hope. People started seeking a redeemer in Imran Khan, and developed a high level of expectations from him. The success of PTI in general elections was considered a beacon of hope. It was expected that with the victory of PTI, every single Pakistani will get rid of a long gloomy past. PTI established a highly ideal and emotional rhetoric in order to

maintain the support of people. The emergence of PTI proved a great setback to conventional political parties. For a while, it was believed that the career of conventional political parties has been ended. It seemed as PTI would not only change the contours of politics but the whole political culture of Pakistan at once.

The rhetoric presented by the PTI comprised of a number of agendas in relation to the political, social and economic development. Its rhetoric also included anti-westernism and the revival of Islamic civilization. Politically, PTI waged a war on corruption against the major political parties. Imran Khan created a binary through his speeches between establishment and the people by labelling 'Corrupt Elite' and 'Pure People'. This act of PTI started to generate a political polarization in society both vertically and horizontally. The supporters of PTI manifest a rigidity in their political views by leaving people with the option of being an enlightened PTI supporter or a political ignorant. In the socio-economic sphere, PTI introduced various reforms and packages either completed or not, but initiated by the PTI. PTI also promised to establish Riasat-e-Madina in One Hundred days. In this Riasat-e-Madina, it was aspired to transform all the state and social institutions according to the teachings of Islam. Khan also Islamized the curriculum by adding more religious content in curriculum like Zia-ul-Haq. Khan also showed a great support for Taliban and envisioned the revival of Islamic civilization with the support of Taliban. Khan gave an anti-Western agenda in order to win more hearts. The foreign policy during the tenure of PTI did not seem effective, even in the case of immediate neighbors including China and India it deserves a criticism.

After gaining a popularity and winning the confidence of masses, Khan started to turn into an autocrat with his authoritarian approach. His authoritarian approach is manifested from his interference in state institutions including judiciary and challenging the role of military. This authoritarian approach strengthened with each passing day and started to pose a challenge to the stability of the country. Transformation of Khan from a charismatic leader into an authoritarian one started to pose a number of internal and external challenges. Pakistan has already been suffering from

a number of challenges since its inception. now it is in no position to endure more political, social and economic damage. The populist experiment already did not work effectively in the political history of Pakistan, even in the case of Zia-ul-Haq it engendered a number of irreversible damages. In the light of historical experiences, the presence of a right-wing populist in the country is not encouraging.

Pakistani society is heterogenous and diverse in relation to ethnic identities, culture, language, politics and religion. This society has already been segmented on various lines, and offers a number of conflicts. Unfortunately, the diversity of Pakistani society is defined more in conflict than collaboration. In such a fragmented society presence of a populist leader is dangerous as the populists create a political polarization and a divide in society.

Economically Pakistan is in no position to handle a populist leader as these leaders take austerity measures involving a high-risk factor with totally unpredictable consequences.

Unfortunately, Pakistan carries a poor image of political instability and already enduring a long history of political failures.

The populist strategy of Khan revolves around the element of religion, religion has always been a very sensitive issue in Pakistan, especially it became more sensitive after the era of Zia-ul-Haq.

Now, there must be no room for politics in the name of religion in order to avoid more conflict.

Geo-strategic location of Pakistan does not allow it to have a populist leader because of its tough relations with immediate neighbors.

Conclusion

The above discussion gives an explicit view of populist ideology and its multi-dimensional impacts. It explains the causes behind the emergence of recent wave of populism. Populist politics is not a new phenomenon, it prevailed in the history of international politics in the form of various political systems including socialism, communism and fascism. In the recent scenario, it has started to emerge in liberal democracies and this aspect gives it not only a new dimension, but an immediate attention from the political philosophers and social scientists. Populist politics is filled with emotional and ideal rhetoric. Populists not only generate a binary but

ideologically believe in the politics of all or nothing. They lack a realist political perspective of finding a middle way by establishing negotiations. Populist politics has a capacity to create a vertical and horizontal divide in society.

Populism is mainly divided into left-wing and right-wing; both these wings share a common [radical] ground. Despite sharing a common ground, there a number of differences between their objectives and practices. Right-wing populists are exclusionary and conservative in nature. Left-wing populist ideology is associated with socio-economic development. Left-wing populists create only a vertical divide otherwise, they are inclusionary in their ideological approach and political practice.

Emergence of right-wing populism is witnessed in a number of regions; this is emerging especially in the countries where liberal democracies remained ineffective in rendering their people. There is also a consensus on the fact that the cause for the emergence of populism in 21st century is the failure of most of liberal democracies. This rise of populism has been adding on to the already existing identity issues and exacerbating the situation by posing new sort of challenges. Pakistan is one the countries, facing this menace of populism. Rise of a right-wing populist political party in Pakistan (PTI) has generated a number of concerns in relation to the political, social and economic development. Currently, Pakistan both at internal and external front is in no position to endure the consequences of the unpredictable policies of a populist leader, as Pakistan has already been bearing the brunt of the experiments of previous populist leaders.

Recommendations

Populism is a complex phenomenon which raises a number of concerns. There must be some collaborative measures to tackle this menace. In this regard, some recommendations have been mentioned in the following;

Rise of populism in 21st century shows the incapacity at the part of liberal democracies. So, liberal democracies must ponder on their political measures and policies.

Democratic countries must ensure the element of inclusivity in order to avoid conflicts or horizontal divisions in society

Democratic states should address the grievances of politically marginalized and economically deprived communities.

Democracy in majoritarian form itself provides a cause for conflict in society by marginalizing ethnic, lingual and religious minorities. In a democratic system, the participation of these minorities in policy formulation or in decision making process must be ensured.

To eliminate the menace of populism and secure the best interests of masses, there is a need to carry out efforts through negotiations between the conventional leaders and the populist ones.

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