

ECPS Party Profile Series #3

February 2021



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Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf: Pakistan's Iconic Populist Movement



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Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf: Pakistan's Iconic Populist Movement

BY IHSAN YILMAZ & KAINAT SHAKIL

ABSTRACT

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) used to be an activist party at a time when civil society was highly subdued under a military regime. Through modest civil disobedience, it has graduated to the status of a formidable opposition party. It has used populist rhetoric and tactics to delegitimize and “other-ize” the conventional parties and position itself as the ideal voice and hope for “the people.” It has used a wide array of ideologies to support its populism, which tapped into deep-rooted anxieties in the public’s psyche.

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ECPS Leader Profile Series offer analyses of political leaders and prominent public figures with populist tendencies. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed by the author are only attributable him and not to any institution with which they are associated.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, Pakistan has faced several crises of governance. As a young state, it lost its founding father in 1948, hardly a year after its birth, leaving the country in the hands of relatively inexperienced politicians who mainly came from the landed elite. Poverty, ethno-linguistic rifts, civil war, a lack of economic output, and refugee crises – along with internal and external security issues – all challenged the country, which oscillated between military dictatorships and brief periods of populist democratic-turned-autocratic governments.

The late 1980s and 1990s brought a window of opportunity for political parties; however, during government instability coupled with corruption and resource mismanagement led to the general public seeing their needs unmet. Through consecutive failed democratic governments led by the two main parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), corruption, rampant poverty, insecurity, and growing external debt were core issues. Amidst this backdrop of crumbling institutional capacity emerged a small party called the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).[1]

PTI was founded by the iconic Pakistani sportsman, Imran Khan, in 1996. Khan was a national hero: under his captaincy, Pakistan's national cricket team has won its first and only Cricket World Cup in 1992, after a hotly contested match against England. He was a well-respected public figure who had spent a considerable amount of time in philanthropy, establishing the first cancer hospital in Pakistan. Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre was established in Lahore on 29 December 1994. In 1985, Khan's mother had scumbled to cancer, inspiring him to build a hospital for the poor who had no access to cancer treatment. There are now branches of the hospital in Lahore, Peshawar, and Karachi (the latter under construction), and they provide world-class free healthcare to oncology patients who could otherwise not afford the treatments.

Khan's charitable work also led him to establish the not-for-profit tertiary educational institute, Namal. Khan had spread his campaigns across every section of society, making him a beloved figure. His fundraisers were high profile – Princess Diana was even present at one – while at the grassroots level, children called the "Tigers" collected funds for his causes. Thus, when Imran Khan launched PTI in 1996, he was seen as an honest and dedicated figure, despite speculation about his ability to survive the Pakistani political arena. He had no history of corruption and, most importantly, was a man who felt dard (pain) for the common people.



Activists of Tehreek-e-Insaf are holding protest demonstration against detention of social media activists by law enforcers on May 22, 2017 in Karachi. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

From an Infant Party to Activist Party

PTI in its early years struggled to gain a mass following. With no experience in politics, surviving in a country like Pakistan was difficult. Most mainstream parties have dynastic, feudalistic, and baradari (caste-based) voter banks and roots. In the first elections that it contested, in 1997, the party was unable to win a single seat in the national or provincial assemblies. In this period, it didn't accept offers by PML-N to join their party, as PTI believed the status quo to be corrupt.

Throughout the latter part of the 1990s, PTI's membership was restricted to a group of reformist elite who were seeking to address Pakistan's core issues, such as poverty, health inequality, out-of-school children, and other human development issues. A group of Western-educated members under the leadership of Khan, himself an Oxford graduate, sought to bring change to the people.

Following the Kargil disaster, where Pakistan was defeated by India in the dis-

puted territory of Kashmir, a military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his government. In 2001, Musharraf instituted the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, installing himself as President and calling for fresh elections in 2002. Post 9/11, PTI remained a one-man party, and it supported Musharraf's reformist agenda of eradicating terrorism and other core issues. The pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League Quaid (PML-Q) won the most votes in 2002, and PTI, in its second election, won one seat in the National Assembly, from Mianwali Khan's hometown; it formed a coalition with minority parties jointly called the National Alliance (NA).

PTI refused invitations from Musharraf to join the ruling coalition, remaining true to NA coalition, one that included prominent figures such as the former President Farooq Ahmad Lagari and religious cleric turned politician Tahir-ul-Qadri and his Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT). Winning a seat in the National Assembly gave PTI a platform to voice its agenda. The head of the party made proactive use of Pakistan's newly privatized media landscape. During the Musharraf regime, censorship was

a huge issue, yet the media market was also highly liberalized; as a result, several private news channels emerged (Hasan, 2017).

It was during primetime talk shows that PTI gained a market for its populist ideals. Imran Khan became a fixture on media shows and spread, in the early days, an “activist” populism. By this point, Khan opposed the authoritarian Musharraf Presidency and his supposed “US backing.” For the second time in two decades, America had involved Pakistan in its affairs with Afghanistan. The “war on terror” led to a number of Taliban crossing the porous Pakistan-Afghan border and to seek refuge in the tribal Western regions of the country. The “Talibanization” of these remote areas led the US to attack many hotspots in Pakistan via drone strikes – strikes that killed a large number of innocent civilians as well as militants.

Pakistan was caught in the crosshairs. On the one hand, US drone strikes; on the other, the Taliban frequently targeted schools, public offices, places of worship, and markets. These attacks killed thousands of Pakistani civilians. This gave PTI the perfect opportunity to adapt itself to the new political realities and use populist anti-US sentiment to gain a foothold in the political debates on primetime shows and in other news media.

This was a shift. In the 1990s, its concerns were more humanitarian; now, it addressed divisive issues that were highly charged, such as the US’s involvement in Pakistan, the drone strikes in tribal areas, the future of democracy in the country, and the worsening security situation for the average Pakistani. PTI spent this time carrying out modest rallies and protests as well. For instance, Imran Khan staged a hunger strike in 2007 when Musharraf unconstitutionally dismissed the country’s Chief Justice (Walsh, 2007). PTI went on national TV and talked about the taboo topic of “missing persons,” such as Dr. Aafia Siddiqui and those “disappeared” in Balochistan (Mir, 2018). Touching the “forbidden” issues gave PTI the image of a party that was brave and not afraid of the military government or the US. The anti-US rhetoric was hugely popular, growing PTI’s popularity in a society where

anti-West feelings run deep.

During this period, Imran Khan publicly called out Musharraf, exclaiming at one public protest, “your General Musharraf will not survive nor shall the money you looted be safe”. It was during this period that PTI aired its concerns over “foreign” involvement in the country; Khan, the only elected member from his party, was very vocal about America and the colonial attitudes of Western powers. In an interview, he aired his views by saying: “Across the spectrum, from the right to the left, [Pakistanis] want Musharraf to go The U.S. administration must be getting this information. In Pakistan, according to all the polls, [U.S. officials] are backing someone who is deeply unpopular in the country” (Inskeep, 2008). For his outspoken stance and part in the Lawyers Movement, the PTI leader was jailed in 2007.

PTI was an activist party at a time when civil society groups were curbed. It gained public notoriety through its populist anti-West and pro-democracy rhetoric, holding itself in opposition to Pakistan’s fourth military dictatorship and the second American-led Afghan war (Montagne & Reeves, 2007).

Rise to Opposition

In 2008, PTI took its activism against the regime very seriously. Unlike the mainstream political parties such as the Pakistan’s Peoples Party (PPP) and PML-N, it was not an established part of the political landscape. As such, it decided to not partake in the 2008 general elections, once again positioning itself as the “outsider” who refused to play by the “dirty” and “corrupt” rules. The party firmly believed that the Musharraf regime was still in control and would skew the election results. In an interview Khan said: “Sooner or later, we will have to have free and fair elections..... Any government coming out of these fraudulent elections is not going to last long” (Inskeep, 2008).

As Khan was out of parliament between 2008-2013, his party now focused on using media and mass campaigns to position itself as an “external” opposition. The PPP-

led Zardari government saw a rise in inflation, corruption, and external debt, and by 2013, the people were tired of the PPP government and the passive opposition of the PML-N. The presence of PTI as a party with a “non-corrupt” leader greatly appealed to the people; during this period, PTI increased its presence on social media and attended many marches and gatherings called jalsas before the 2013 elections. PTI was becoming an immensely popular personality party, a fact that was evident in October 2011, when masses of people flooded the PTI jalsa in Lahore’s Minto Park (Dawn, 2011).

These gatherings were new in the sense that they featured women, children and young people in unprecedented numbers. The jalsas featured musical concerts by famous singers/bands such as Ibrar ul Haque, Shehzad Roy, the Strings band, and Attaullah Khan Esakhelvi. They also featured fiery speeches opposing the corrupt Zardari oligarchy delivered by Chairman Khan. Khan used his crude and witty remarks to speak the mind of “the people.” These gatherings were a sharp contrast to other political rallies, which rarely used music in the way PTI did and were not “family friendly”; few political rallies allowed women, children, and youth to participate (Mullah, 2017).

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PTI’s support increased as it increasingly positioned itself as the party for insaf (justice); thus, the supporters were commonly referred to as insafians (justice-seekers) and at times as youthias (the youth), given its immense popularity amongst younger Pakistanis.



Activists of Tehreek-e-Insaf and PTI members of Provincial Assembly are holding anti corruption rally passing through the road, on May 06, 2016 in Peshawar. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

PTI’s support increased as it increasingly positioned itself as the party for insaf (justice); thus, the supporters were commonly referred to as insafians (justice-seekers) and at times as youthias (the youth), given its immense popularity amongst younger Pakistanis. In a society where police and the courts, the pinnacles of justice, take bribes to do their jobs, the call for “justice” was a chord that struck deep. This was especially true for youth who’d grown up hearing about corruption, terrorism, inflation, and unemployment. In the early 2010s, urban areas and in particular the middle class gravitated towards PTI’s anti-status quo stance, attracted by its lack of corruption and the fact it was a new party, free of the usual hereditary politics. And unlike the PPP and PML-N, PTI didn’t have a history of broken electoral promises (Warraich, 2018).

In 2012, in response to continued drone killings, PTI took the courageous decision to launch a motorcade “march” in the drone-impacted areas on Pakistan’s western frontier. Its presence in South Waziristan brought the party great acclaim at home, as no other party had dared to venture into the troubled region, again assuring its supporters that PTI was unlike others and possessed the courage to make the right decisions (BBC, 2012). The party and its chairman became the voice of dissent on the issue of the Taliban. While terrorism claimed lives in Pakistan on an almost daily basis, PTI argued that military intervention was not the solution. This solidified its support amongst the predominantly foreign-educated and upper middle-class elites (Mullah, 2017).

At the same time, PTI voiced its sympathy for the Taliban, who they believed had been “used” by the US during the Soviet era and were now being hunted. Khan believed there were “good” and “bad” Taliban, a common conservative position at the time (Mullah, 2017). The party talked of mediation, conflict resolution, and rehabilitation. Thus, PTI was seen as a rational and pro-peace building party that believed in reforming and integrating the “good” Taliban back into society (Afzal, 2019; Mullah, 2017; Dawn, 2011). Again, PTI had struck a populist chord and appeased two polar opposite sides of society.

The anti-US rhetoric and a narrative of change, anti-corruption, and peace, coupled with the jalsas and the chairman’s past charity, all buoyed PTI before the 2013 general elections. The hopes for a Naya Pakistan (New Pakistan) through tabdili (change) embedded in justice led to a boost in support for PTI. This tsunami would bring change to society. For over 60 years, the country had seen the deterioration a promise of change and worsening social and economic conditions. The media and social media coverage helped position PTI as the “outsider” led by the kaptan (captain). The charisma of the kaptan was the core of PTI.



Ascent to Power and ‘Container’ Politics

Until 2011, PTI opposed aligning itself with “politically electable” candidates, but as the 2013 elections neared, a number of prominent figures such as Shah Mehmood Qureshi (current Foreign Minister) from the PPP and Makhdoom Javed Hashmi and his brother from the PML-N joined the party (Rao, 2018). A small number of ex-PML-Q members also joined the party, such as sugar tycoon Jahangir Tareen. In addition, many notable elites joined the party. These included s Dr Arif Alvi (the current President) and Dr Shireen Mazari (the current Federal Minister for Human Rights) (Dawn, 2011). PTI gradually gained momentum by not only amassing a cult of insafians but also key political players. It made a compromise which it justified as means to an end. That end? Secure power to usher in meaningful change for the people.

In its third general elections, PTI fared well. It was not able to secure a majority of the votes nationally, but it won a majority in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) by securing 19 percent of the votes and winning 48 seats (Election Commis-

sion of Pakistan, 2013). PTI formed its first coalition government with the far-right Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), left-leaning Qaumi Watan Party (QWP), and a host of independent candidates. This odd coalition (when PTI already had a comfortable majority) was led by Pervez Khattak, a reformist ex-PPP supporter.

PTI also secured seats in Punjab, where it positioned itself as the opposition.

In KPK, a war-torn region severely impacted by the war on terror, PTI launched a number of reformist programs that focused on technocratic solutions pertaining to good governance, e-governance, public-private partnerships, accountability, and anti-corruption. It established several commissions to promote businesses, provided infrastructure for commerce in the region, and make it smoother to deal with street-level bureaucracy (Daudzai, 2018).

These policies and measures failed to alleviate the widespread problems, especially as PTI failed to implement the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which gave provinces the autonomy to establish local governments that support the implementation of policies (Daudzai, 2018). To appease its partner JI, school

curriculums were “Islam-ized” and Quran classes became compulsory – this despite PTI campaigning on de-radicalizing youth (Abbasi, 2017; Dawn, 2014). During its first term, PTI acted as a populist party in two ways. It compromised by Islamizing school curriculum, appeasing its right-wing partner, and it was unable to effectively translate its populist ideals into realities that benefited the people.

Inayatullah Khan, the local Governance Minister, pointed out, “There are errors in current textbooks which go against our values.” He explained, “We live in an Islamic society, women don’t wear skirts here.” The Minister further showed his contempt for the previous government, which removed the religious chapter and replaced it with “chapters on Nelson Mandela, Karl Marx, Marco Polo, Vasco de Gama and Neil Armstrong” (Dawn, 2014).

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Unable to live up to its promises, the party frequently hid its failures behind increasingly dense and intensifying populist rhetoric focusing on vindictive character assassinations of political opponents, specifically through the use of crude and foul language.

PTI frequently shied away from the realities on the ground and blamed the federal government (under control of the PML-N) for not providing funds to fully achieve its goals. For instance, a senior PTI party member conceded that the party had failed to bring about transparency and accountability in the province but asserted that, “The nation must strengthen the hands of Imran Khan since he was the only politician who can steer the country out of the prevailing crisis” (Sadaqat, 2017).

Unable to live up to its promises, the party frequently hid its failures behind increasingly dense and intensifying populist rhetoric focusing on vindictive character assassinations of political opponents, specifically through the use of crude and foul language. It also petitioned the courts, alleging “rigged” election results. In its quest to drag down Nawaz Sharif, PTI framed him as the “enemy” of the people, not merely a political rival. The call for Naya Pakistan was contrasted to the corrupt and dismal current Pakistan.

Together, these steps were enough to distract people from the party’s own poor performance. The jalsas from the pre-election days gave PTI the street power to galvanize supporters. Post-2013, the mass turned into dharna (container) politics, in which Imran Khan roused huge mobs while he sat inside a shipping container, only to emerge to deliver his fiery speeches – thus earning the name “container politics” (BBC, 2014).

The speeches talked about bringing dignity to the wronged people by kicking out the “corrupt” and making the country “great” for the ordinary masses. PTI was certainly not the first or last to use this style of container politics; however, its populist message was so well received that it staged one of the longest dharnas in the country’s modern history (Khan, 2019).

Soon after the 2013 election results, PTI launched a court case against the ruling PML-N government, accusing them of vote-rigging (Lashari & Mirza, 2013). PTI’s populist drive for “justice” was buoyed by young people and the party’s social media “army,” which took the internet by storm, demanding change and spreading the party’s populist narrative (Jahangir, 2020).

In 2014, PTI collaborated with right-wing religious scholar Tahir ul Qadri and his PAT; together, they launched mass civil disobedience campaigns that started on 14 August 2014 and were called off on 17 December of the same year (Express Tribune, 2014). In 2013, Qadri and his disciples had blocked the main intersection in Islamabad, protesting against the “corrupt government.” This came to be known as the “Long March” (2013). Qadri had

amassed support on the promise that, “tomorrow, the injustices will end, and these corrupt people will no longer run the government” (Rodriguez, 2013).

After the protests and elections in June 2014, several of Qadri’s disciples from his religious NGO Minhaj-ul-Quran were killed in Model Town, Lahore, by Punjab Police. The killings led PAT to join PTI’s Azadi March (Freedom March) or the Tsunami March with new zeal as they sought to avenge the blood of the “martyrs of the Model Town Massacre” (Imran, 2014). PTI strategically used a national tragedy to join forces with the religious right-wing populist party in an effort to pressure the government into resigning and calling new elections. It was deeply cynical, but PTI convinced its supporters that this was a necessary part of ridding Pakistan of “the corrupt politicians” (Mullah, 2017).

For 126 days, PTI and its partner organized marches across Pakistan and sit-ins, mainly in Islamabad and other key cities. They demanded tribunals to investigate alleged election fraud. These protests were given 24/7 live coverage on numerous media channels; primetime “analytical gurus” buzzed about the future of Pakistani politics and the rise of a highly popular Khan. PTI was now a serious political contender. PTI trended across all media platforms. The party’s anti-corruption call, and their insistence that foreign involvement end, became household discussions around the country.

PTI was the perfect messenger. It was a relatively new party, with no substantial corruption allegations against it and a charismatic leader who communicated with the masses in plain and frank language about their core issues and gave them hope for a better, fairer society – a utopian, Naya Pakistan (Mullah, 2017).

By the end of the protests, PTI was increasingly seen as a “silver bullet” for the country’s problems: its anti-corruption message was the answer to it all. It was simple logic, according to the PTI: Pakistan was a poor country with no money because the corrupt had looted it; thus, once the corrupt elite – including the politicians – were brought to justice, the money would return, and the country

would be prosperous (Mullah, 2017).

This “common-sense” populist logic helped the party connect to people all rungs of society. “Go Nawaz Go” became a national slogan, which PTI supporters chanted at rallies and hash-tagged across social media (Dawn, 2014).

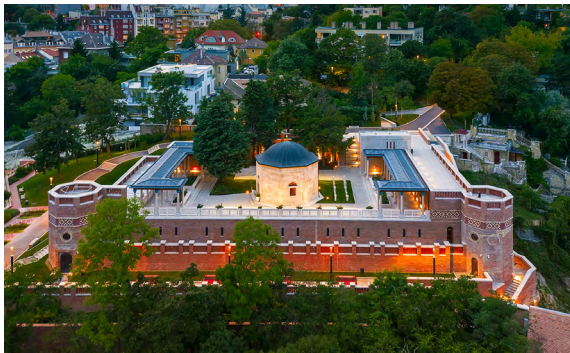
PTI dominated the politics of the period, despite being in the opposition. It also triggered a second court case against PML-N and its core members such as Nawaz Sharif and his family – this time, for an alleged money laundering scheme. PTI vowed to bring justice by prosecuting the corrupt Nawaz oligarchy. This movement gained credibility after Nawaz family members were linked to the leak of the Panama Papers (Cheema, 2017). During the year-long trial, PTI was again all over the media in an effort to gather public support and call out the sitting government. They also organized a series of sit-in, dharnas, and protests in front of key government buildings, as well as the Sharif’s residence itself in Riwind, Lahore (Cheema, 2017; Specia, 2017).

PTI’s was increasingly exerting pressure on state institutions, such as the judiciary, to follow their directives, a highly undemocratic use of public protests. When PTI was called out for using its protests to pressure the judiciary, Khan lashed out, saying, “Is seeking justice from the courts the equivalent of pressure?” He went on to say, “They (PML-N) are the ones pressuring us!” He also warned Nawaz Sharif, “Hear me loud and clear, Nawaz Sharif: whatever you are doing here, now you shall see that the Pakistani nation will no longer silently tolerate all this!” (Cheema, 2017). Any state institution or media group that sided with the Sharifs was deemed corrupt or serving the oligarchy. In extreme cases they were “the other,” who were working against the interests of the people for selfish motives – or even carrying out foreign objectives.

At the concurrent PTI gatherings, the same rhetoric was used to reassure the people that they were a “great nation,” and only the corrupt, status quo politicians stood in the way of achieving their destiny. Imran Khan and other PTI members repeatedly called the Nawaz brothers by various nicknames, including “blood

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PTI increasingly positioned any opposition from the government to curb it or counter it as “schemes” by the ruling parties to deny justice to the people. Thus, any attack directed at PTI was an attack on “the people,” a populist manoeuvre to gain immunity from criticism by being one with the people.



PTI Chairman Imran Khan addresses to public meeting held at Shahi Bagh in Peshawar on May 27, 2015.
Photo: Awais Khan

sucking cowards,” Gidd-Sharif (vultures), Mian-Panama Sharif (mocking Nawaz for his involvement in the Panama leaks), circus-Sharifs, Drama-Sharif, and Show-baz Sharif (an actor). Following the Supreme Court verdict disqualifying Nawaz Sharif, PTI celebrated with a “thanksgiving” gathering. Within 24 hours of the ruling, thousands rallied to Islamabad to attend the event. This was portrayed as a victory of the people – not the party. PTI increasingly positioned any opposition from the government to curb it or counter it as “schemes” by the ruling parties to deny justice to the people. Thus, any attack directed at PTI was an attack on “the people,” a populist manoeuvre to gain immunity from criticism by being one with the people.

Imran Khan increasingly focused on the narrative of an azad qoum – a nation free from the tyranny of the oppressive political elite and the Western agendas that had led to Pakistan’s external debt.

Between 2013-2018, PTI came into direct confrontation with police, in particular the Punjab police, during its mass protests. The party argued that the policemen were their “brothers” or countrymen who were being used by the sitting government to create “division within the country,” serving the self-interests of the political elite.

The sitting government was repeatedly warned that they would be held accountable for the sins they had committed against the people, and that once those who were “robbing the country in the name of democracy” were thrown behind bars and the Swiss bank accounts emptied, then, “god willing, this great country and a great nation” would have justice achieve its “true” greatness. PTI’s populist rhetoric meant that, as the voice of the people, it was always pure in its actions and intentions. The same rhetoric deflected all blame to the “status quo.”

PTI’s agenda for the 2018 elections centred around a welfare state modelled on the first Islamic state of Madinah (Riyasat-e-Madina). It would be dedicated to serving the people, and this would be made possible by PTI ensuring that “the 5 to 10 thousand people that are sucking the blood of this country” would be weeded out and the money returned to the people. The party’s simple, populist logic for highly complex problems was accepted by the public in a country where belief in miracles is common and education is a rare commodity.

By the end of PML-N’s term, the party had lost its main leadership, as various members of the Sharif family and fraternity were under investigation in a multitude of money laundering and tax-evasion cases, a great win for the PTI which had legitimized itself by leading the charge for these investigations.

With PML-N and PPP leadership engulfed in corruption scandals, the PTI had an opportunity. Unlike other opposition parties – for example, the Muttahida Qa-

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PTI was able to muster support that went beyond religious-cultural divides. Its promise of a welfare state based on Medina's were accepted by liberals, moderates, and conservatives who saw this vague promise through the lens of their own interpretations. The calls of the anti-establishment parties had resonated with all sectors of the populace.

umi Movement (MQM) that relied on ethnicity alone religious parties like JI – PTI was able to muster support that went beyond religious-cultural divides. Its promise of a welfare state based on Medina's were accepted by liberals, moderates, and conservatives who saw this vague promise through the lens of their own interpretations. The calls of the anti-establishment parties had resonated with all sectors of the populace (Ahmed, 2018; Judah 2018). Its smear campaign to delegitimize the “corrupt” political parties left PTI as the only legitimate choice.

PTI's victory was secured when it welcomed several defectors from the PPP and PML-N along with former PML-Q members. It had promised various incentives to these factions, securing their loyalty – for example, the South Punjab parties were promised a separate province,[2] and after the election many key posts from Punjab and the Federal Government were handed to these factions (Adnan, 2018). PTI was politically shrewd and welcomed the likes of Shaikh Rahseed, who was a former political rival known for mocking PTI and Imran Khan. PTI welcomed and later gave ministries to the likes of Fawad Chaudhry, who previously worked with the Musharraf regime and PPP govern-

ments. In defence of the party's sudden open-arms policy, Khan argued: “You contest elections to win. You don't contest elections to be a good boy. I want to win. I am fighting elections in Pakistan, not Europe. I can't import European politicians”(Rehman 2018). Given Khan's clean history, disillusionment with the current political parties and PTI's simple promises to complex solutions, supporters dismissed this cynical manoeuvring as a necessary evil.

Breaking Promises — The Ass in Lion's Skin

In the 2018 general elections, PTI won the most votes, securing 31% of the popular vote and winning 149 seats in the national assembly (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018).

PTI's leaders had pledged to its supporters that if elected to office, they would end corruption in 19 days and terrorism in 90 days. A key feature of both promises hinged on bringing “back every single penny of the looted money from the corrupt political leaders” (The Express Tribune, 2018; The News, 2018). The party had an overly ambitious 100-day agenda which outlined all the problems in the country and PTI's promises to solve them (Dawn, 2018). However, all that glitters is not gold: PTI struggled to meet its pledges.

On the economic front, PTI has failed to live up to its ambitions for employment, small business-led growth, and support for export driven sectors; even before the pandemic, Pakistan's debt and liabilities surged by Rs11 trillion (more than \$70 billion) within one year. During the same period, the Pakistan Stock Exchange, the KSE-100 index, saw a sharp slump coupled with one of the worst devaluations of the Pakistan Rupee against the US Dollar. Matters were made worse by the inflation rate at 7 percent, unemployment at 9 percent – it was worse among youth – and the rising prices of petrol and utilities (Eusufzye, 2018; Jamal, 2018). Thus, like any other populist party once in power, PTI found it hard to achieve its promises

through its “simple” populist solutions.

Apart from the economic disaster, PTI also failed to live up to its most basic promises. None of the socialist programs inspired by Islamism panned out. The Naya Pakistan Housing, youth programs, SMEs Loans, Ehsan welfare programs, the Sehat Insaf Cards, even Tree Tsunami ... all are under investigation for corruption charges (Qayyum, 2020; Khan, 2020; Mehmood, 2019). In the past, the party had said it would not “take the begging bowl” to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in search of a bailout, yet after a year of delaying, PTI eventually opted for an IMF package (Farmer, 2020). When faced with the realities of a large population and nearly empty state coffers, the party has had to backtrack. Populist rhetoric is difficult to translate into actual socio-economic change.

The party had to rely on the US, China, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries at various points for loans, a practise which PTI had previously condemned. Since assuming office, the government has not been able to solve the Kashmir dispute with India, despite their promises for a “quick fix” to the prolonged regional conflict. In fact, matters have only been made worse post-August 2019, when India scrapped the region’s autonomous status by dismissing Article 370 and 35A. In the international arena, Pakistan has found no ally other than China and Turkey to support its claims about the disputed territory (Janjua, 2020). To mask its diplomatic embarrassment, PTI leadership in the foreigner ministry has repeatedly externalized blame to the Indian and Israeli “lobbies” working to destabilize Pakistan.

On its accountability and institutional reformist agendas, the party has also failed to meet its promises. PTI sought an end to “VIP culture,”[4] yet as the party eased into power, its ministers frequently and lavishly went on foreign tours and maintained full escorts and private facilities (Pakistan Today, 2018). In addition, PTI has failed its liberal supporters, too. Dr. Atif Mian was dismissed from the Economic Advisory Council (EAC)[5] based on his religious identification with the Ahmadi school, a blow to minority rights (Dawn, 2020).

Moreover, while the PTI government flaunts its peace initiative of welcoming Sikh pilgrims to sacred landmarks such as Kartarpur, the country sees regular forced conversions, abductions, target killing, and murders of Shia Muslims and non-Muslims. PTI remains silent on most of these issues. A number of PTI members are former JI members or from JI’s student wing; thus, it did not come as a surprise when Ali Muhammad Khan, Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, claimed on Twitter that beheading is the fit punishment for those who mock Prophet Mohammad (Inayat, 2020). PTI had specifically distinguished itself as having a higher moral ground on humanitarian issues, yet it has failed to deliver here, too, as it has either maintained silence on such issues or deflected the blame to India for sponsoring “terrorism” – using another layer of populism to cover its failed populist agenda.

Over the past two-and-a-half years PTI has taken an apologist approach, conceding that not all of its ministers have performed and that governing is “complex.” However, Khan has said, “The people have to decide whether we have improved their lives or not.” The fault now lies with “the others” – including people those who refused to pay taxes – and not the

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PTI rose to power on the back of an unregulated media, but is now heavily reliant on the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to censor any content it deems unfit, may it be biscuit advertisements that are “not in line with cultural values” to banning the speeches of opposition leader Nawaz Sharif on charges of sedition.



Activists of Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) are holding protest demonstration against rape and murder of minor Rabia, on April 22, 2018 in Karachi.
Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

government. (While in the opposition, PTI blamed the previous governments for not collecting the revenue.)

In a recent interview, Khan was asked why Pakistan has a high rate of child and sexual abuse, rather than talking about the need for the government to start dialogues around sex education and abuse, he blamed the “Western porn sites” and “influences” as the cause of the horrific crimes, again shunning responsibility, shifting the blame and making use of the popular anti-West sentiments (Hum News, 2020).

Amidst COVID-19, the government initially did little more than tell people, “Aap ne ghabrana nahi hai” (you must not panic), while the responsibility for the ravaging pandemic was blamed on the provinces, if PTI was not the majority party, or chalked up to the public’s non-cooperation (John, 2020; Dawn, 2020). When populists fail to deliver, they deflect blame and portray themselves as victims.

PTI has also directly targeted the opposition. To ensure its survival, the party is not shy about undermining the institutional integrity of other state pillars, proof of its populist, as opposed to democratic, values. From its inception, PTI has given support to the army, and this was visible when the judiciary was targeted by PTI members after the courts handed out a death sentence to President General Pervez Musharraf. In contrast to their previous stance on Musharraf in the 2000s, after assuming power, PTI supports the institution. Fawad Chaudhry, a Federal Minister said: “You pushed the institu-

tion [army] against the wall. It is an honour-based institution. If you keep doing this, won’t they react?” He also directly threatened the judiciary (Qayum & Haider, 2019; Gulf News, 2019).

PTI has dragged Justice Isa Qazi and his wife to court after the judge made an anti-establishment comment (Global Village Space, 2019). Imran Khan has challenged the writ of the court by objecting to the Supreme Court blocking the extension of the current army chief (Farmer, 2019). The PM stated, “The people’s confidence in country’s judicial system has been shaken and now they are looking towards the PTI government for improvement in the system” (Dawn, 2020). PTI has used pressure and mudslinging when the judiciary has not sided with them or helped them with “pro-public” decisions to maintain its grasp on power.

PTI rose to power on the back of an unregulated media, but is now heavily reliant on the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to censor any content it deems unfit, may it be biscuit advertisements that are “not in line with cultural values” to banning the speeches of opposition leader Nawaz Sharif on charges of sedition. The government has also targeted the head of Jang Group, Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman, who was arrested on corruption charges in March 2020; journalists within the group had dared to publish content critical of the government. Rehman’s defenders have also faced backlash.

The Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA) is another tool PTI’s used to control all forms of media, along with the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules of 2020, which aims to regulate social media (Mahbubani, 2020). The ambiguous language of the bill allows for it to ban content on charges of “terrorism, extremism, hate speech, defamation, fake news, incitement to violent and national security” (Rehman, 2020).

Moreover, civil society’s dissenting voices have been squashed. Several humanitarian NGOs and INGOs have been sent packing for their “anti-state” agendas (Sayeed, 2018). While PTI once showed its support to the plight of the Pashtun victims of the “war on terror,” it is currently targeting

members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) – a civil society movement that seeks peaceful conflict resolutions in the aftermath of several military operations in the region (The News, 2019).

CONCLUSION

PTI has evolved through three stages of development. It was an activist party at a time when civil society was highly subdued under a military regime. Through modest civil disobedience, it graduated to the status of a formidable opposition party. It used populist rhetoric and tactics to delegitimize and “otherize” the conventional parties and position itself as the ideal voice and hope for “the people.” It used a wide array of ideologies to support its populism, which tapped into deep-rooted anxieties in the public’s psyche.

In a country where politicians are conventionally corrupt, relations with neighbouring countries are strained, social welfare is absent, Islamism is rampant, and economic decline is a constant, PTI has successfully positioned itself as the voice of the people. It promised to drive out the corrupt elite and alleged “foreign” interventions and influences. It invited people with open arms to lively rallies where the leader spoke the language of the people, voicing their concerns and worries and presenting simplistic solutions they understood. It clearly identified the enemy and positioned itself as the solution to all problems. PTI has used religion, anti-West sentiments, its outsider status, support for welfare, and a host of social issues to craft a populist narrative that appealed to the people.

Its third evolution – becoming the government – has been a turbulent process. PTI has broken several of its promises. To deflect blame, it has used oppressive tactics, blanketing and muffling the media, characterizing COVID-19 as the cause of its failures, and externalizing blame. It has blamed Western and foreign influences and called opposition parties anti-state and anti-democratic.

Freudian displacement, projection, and rationalization have become the hallmarks of PTI’s first tenure in office. Its populist rhetoric has only intensified as the party increasingly hounds the opposition as “seditious.” Increasingly, PTI gravitates towards homegrown Islamism and pan-Islamism, all in the bid to consolidate its power while trying to appease the masses it has long placated with its populist rhetoric – a public hungry for help after prolonged socio-economic deprivation.

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