P&P

Populism & Politics

P&P Article #4 MARCH 26, 2021

A Quest for Identity: The Case of Religious Populism in Pakistan

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Since its founding, both civil and military Pakistani governments have used religious populism to consolidate support and legitimize their actions. This has paved the way for religious populism to become a part of the nation's cultural imagination and identity. During the country's "infant" or "fragile" democratic phase, religious populism was repeatedly used to consolidate support. Religious parties and groups hold great political sway in the county. Through the use of religious populism, these factions have been allowed to nurture their own "people" who are partisan towards "others." The weak level of governance, political turmoil, and distrust in institutional capabilities has pushed the public into the arms of religious populists.

Walk into a public school in Pakistan and ask the pupils, "what is the meaning of Pakistan?" and it's likely they'll chant "la ilaha illallah."[1] This exemplifies the extent to which religion has seeped into the Pakistani imagination. This is not surprising in a nation-state that was founded on the idea of religious difference from India's Hindu majority—a difference that resulted in the partition of one country into two. Since then, over the period of nearly eight decades, both civil and military governments have used religious populism to consolidate support and legitimize their actions. This has led religious populism to become a part of the nation's cultural imagination and identity. There has been some evidence of what one can describe as left-wing populism in Pakistan, but it has also been tinged with religion.

Pakistani populism, however, does not have a long list of leaders associated with it, due to several reasons. First, populism is anti-elite by definition and this anti-elite sentiment unites ordinary people behind the leader. But what if different regions of the country define "elite" differently? Should the Pakistanis, in the 1950s and the 1960s, have fought against the Punjabi-Mohajir elite or the Punjabi elite, the feudal elite or the civil-military bureaucratic elite, the West Pakistani elite or the Urdu-speaking elite or the business elite? The fragmented Pakistani society allows for populism but creates lots of hurdles for truly national populism. The polarization of the society— a hallmark of populism—is improbable where divisions in society are multi-dimensional.

Second, populism is about ordinary people and their struggles. Therefore, if the leader cannot speak the local lan-

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guage, it is difficult (though not impossible) for him or her to become a populist leader. It is challenging to become the true, long-lost, and authentic leader of the masses when one cannot even speak the language of the masses.

Populism has also been successful in Pakistan because it feeds on an open democratic society. Although populist movements may emerge under dictatorships, they are rare.

Supporters of (PML-N) are showing their zeal during public gathering meeting regarding general election campaign held at Lyari area in Karachi, Pakistan on June 26, 2018. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

The Founding of Pakistan, Its Muslim Identity, and Secularism

Pakistan was carved out of the former British colony of South Asia. The political campaign for independence, the Pakistan movement, gained momentum in the 1940s, giving a voice to South Asia's Muslim minority—"the people" in this case, who felt underrepresented in the politics of India as compared to "the others," the Hindu majority (Jalal, 2010). South Asian Muslims are a rich and diverse blend of ethnicities and sects of Islam (Eaton, 2019). Establishing an "other"—Indian Hindus—created a point of convergence for the Muslim minority.

The founding father of the nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a secular man, faced a dilemma at the time of independence in 1947. He had created a nation based on a Muslim identity but was not interested in establishing a theocracy. Non-Muslims, especially Hindus and Christians, were welcomed as citizens of the new country. In his first address to the Constituent Assembly in 1947, Jinnah said:

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state" (Government of Pakistan, 2021).

During the first decade after independence, when Jinnah or his close associates were ruling Pakistan, religious influence was not peremptory. Religious and cultural sensitivities were kept in mind during the selection of the national flag, as the white-coloured portion represents the country's minorities. This white is set amidst the deep green symbolizing the Muslim majority (Dawn, 2011). The national anthem also does not show a predominant Islamic influence as explained below:

"There are three religious references in the anthem. In the opening stanza, there are two such references: the blessed sacred land and the country being the centre of belief and faith. In the final stanza, the poet talks about Pakistan being 'under the shade of Mighty and Glorious God.' However, none of the three religious references are specific to Islam. References to the sacredness and blessedness of the national territory,

T.J.P members are holding Jinnah Rally on the occasion of Birthday Anniversary of Father of Nation Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in Karachi on December 25, 2017. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

or its being the centre of belief, are a common theme in anthems, and the word used for God is not Allah (the Arabic word for God used in the Quran) but Khuda (a Persian word used initially for Ahura Mazda, the god of Zoroastrianism)" (Saleem, 2017 95)

Jinnah also handpicked Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Dalit[2], who served as the country's first minister of law and labour but was later forced out of office and relocated to India (Balouch, 2015). The Parsi and Christian communities felt welcomed and played a pivotal role in developing the services sector (Notezai, 2019; Lentin, 2017).

This seemingly pluralistic and secular dream of Pakistan was gradually Islamised. After Jinnah's death in 1948, the Objective Resolution, a blueprint for the constitution, was introduced which stated that, "sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah Almighty alone" but also included "the state shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen representatives of the people" (Ahmad, 2019; Pal, 2010; Yilmaz 2016).

Gradual Increase in Reliance on Religion

This gradual increase in the government's reliance on religion was synonymous with the growing political incapacity of Pakistan's leadership. In fact, it can be argued that it was the incapacity of the leadership that forced the instrumental use of religion. However, it must be clear that during this period, Islam was more of a symbolic influence instead of a source of law. Political infighting and an alliance with the United States (US) gave confidence to General Ayub Khan, encouraging him to impose the first martial law. General Ayub (1958-69) initially did not use Islam to legitimize his hold on power. He was vehemently opposed to the religious right using religion in politics, and during his rule, Jamaat-i-Islami leader Abul A'la Moududi was sentenced to death. However, in the latter part of Ayub's rule, he changed his tactics. The Ayub administration tried to delegitimize Jinnah's sister Fatima Jinnah,[3] who fought an election against Ayub Khan to end the military regime. Ayub resorted to orthodox Islamism, claiming women are not allowed to rule in Islam (Ahmed, 2019; New York Time, 1964).

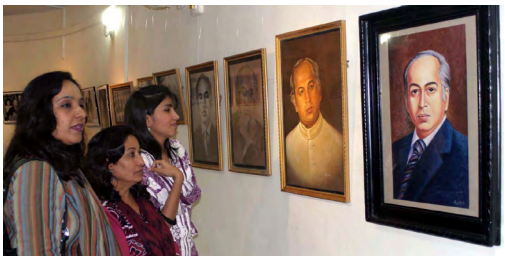
A war with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir facilitated the rise of Islamic populism. India was "otherized" and the narrative of Pakistan was further Islamised and militarized (Kapur & Ganguly, 2012). The need to defend "the people's" faith and nation became influential in the collective national imagination. The religious spirit from 1965 is evident in the era's iconic songs, today a part of the nation's communal memory. Vocabulary such as momin (pious Muslim), marde mujahid (valorous religious warrior), shaheed (martyrs), and ghazi (fighter) were used to glorify the "holy" war (Malik, 2018). However, Ayub—a military bureaucratic authoritarian leader, who was not a practicing Muslim—was never comfortable with religious populism.

Early Populist Leaders

If today one is asked who the first populist leader in Pakistan was, the most likely answer would be Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. This demonstrates our lack of knowledge about Pakistan's history, particularly the history of East Pakistan (the territory of the modern country Bangladesh). Consciously or unconsciously, East Pakistan's role in Pakistan's history is downplayed or ignored. The first populist leader of Pakistan was Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq, popularly known as A.K. Fazlul Haq or Sher-e-Bangla (the lion of Bengal). Fazlul Haq was elected Prime Minister of Bengal twice and remained the PM for six years (1937-43). He was immensely popular with the masses as he was anti-elite and fought against the Hindu and Muslim landlords.

Moulana Bhashani was another populist leader from East Pakistan. He was called the "red moulana." It is hard to find a more fascinating political figure than Moulana Bhashani in the erstwhile united Pakistan. He not only fought the British, the West Pakistani politicians, and the Pakistani military but also his brothers-in-arms, Bengali Awami League leaders H. S. Suhrawardy and Mujibur Rahman. His commitment was only to the poor Bengali peasants that he represented all his life; he never held any government or official position. For his populism, he was called Mazlum Jananeta (leader of the toiling masses).

The heyday for left-wing populism in Pakistan was the late sixties, with Moulana Bhashani and Mujibur Rahman in East Pakistan and Bhutto in West Pakistan all raising anti-elite banners. Both Mujib and Bhutto rejected the constitution and political culture of that time and vowed to create a new country with the help of 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. They upended the politics of both wings in different ways. Mujib's populism became a precursor of the Bangladeshi independence movement, while Bhutto's populism eroded as he began tackling practical socio-economic and governance issues.[4]



Women take keen interest in pictures of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Founder of Peoples Party (PPP) in Hyderabad, Pakistan on April 03, 2011. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

Bhutto's Left and Right Populism

Systematic and institutional discrimination faced by East Pakistanis (who were ethnically Bengali) became a flashpoint for civil war[5] (Nada, 1972). Mujib was the face of Bengali nationalism. Civil unrest, the use of brute military force against Bengali civilians, and invasion by India led to the formation of Bangladesh, in 1971. Mujib became its first President. This event generated ontological insecurity in what remained of Pakistan. Pakistanis could not understand how they lost a war and why half of their countrymen and women decided to leave. It was a critical juncture in national history, and it ushered Pakistani politics down the rabbit hole of religious populism.

Bhutto's slogan, "roti, kapra aur makan" (bread, clothes, and shelter), and his campaign made ordinary people interested in politics. The era of mass politics was not new to East Pakistan, but it was Bhutto who introduced mass politics to West Pakistan. The following is an excerpt which contrasts Bhutto's style with Mujib's and shows the contrasts between populism in East and West Pakistan:

"When Bhutto was introduced to politics, he had no personal constituency of his own and did not develop one for as long as he remained in his job as foreign minister… [it was] when he began to tour the country that he developed a personal following. As with Mujib, the size of Bhutto's following increased very rapidly but, in contrast to Mujib, people were attracted to Bhutto for the novelty of the cause that he had begun to espouse. Bhutto's type of populism was not a new phenomenon in Third World policies. Very deliberately he had fashioned his style and his idiom after such Third World leaders as Sukarno [Indonesia], Nkrumah [Ghana], Peron [Argentina], and Castro [Cuba].

But for West Pakistan, this populist approach was a new development; until that time, West Pakistani politicians had followed a very low-key approach toward politics, preferring to negotiate among themselves rather than to use popular support to further their aims and ambitions. Bhutto was a new kind of leader. Accordingly, the constituency that he cultivated for himself was new—a constituency was galvanised into action very quickly, but when he left the scene, the constituency still remained. Like Peronism, Bhuttoism was to survive Bhutto" (Dutt, 2000: 351).

After the humiliating defeat in war and Bangladeshi independence, the Pakistani military took a backseat and the first directly elected national assembly chose Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto as Prime Minister. Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had been elected on a populist platform which had elements of both socialism and Islamism. Bhutto introduced the term "Islamic socialism" and claimed that Islam and socialism are compatible. However, he was soon forced to make "compromises" due to the increasing power of the religious right which promulgated religious populism against the "un-Islamic" Bhutto government. The 1973 Constitution made Islam the state religion and declared that not only the President, but the Prime Minister of the country would also be Muslim.

Bhutto's popularity slowly began to wane as he became more and more authoritarian. He managed to get rid of elected opposition governments in two provinces. The religious parties, which had never accepted Bhutto's religious credentials, suffered because of Bhutto's oppression; envious of Bhutto's popularity, they gradually ignored their differences and decided to form a united front. Their street power, rioting, and right-wing political collective forced Bhutto to make further concessions such as constitutionally declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims and banning nightclubs and alcohol for Muslims and replacing Sunday with Friday as the weekly holiday (Dawn, 2014). The religious right, and the opposition, the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), "otherized" the "corrupt," "elite," and "un-Islamic" PPP leadership while positioning themselves as the legitimate reflection of "the pious people."

The PNA was a populist and consolidated right-wing political alliance, consisting of nine political parties of the country. It competed in the national election in 1977 with the slogan Nizam-e-Mustafa[6] (system of [Prophet] Muhammad)—i.e., if the PNA won, they would instil Prophet Muhammad's system of governance. Bhutto was targeted as a "sinner" running a "sinful government."

Bhutto won the elections handily but there were allegation of rigging and demonstrations started in the major urban centres. The government and the PNA leadership sat together; just when they were close to an agreement, the military imposed a third martial law on the country (Niazi 1987). Generals not only removed Bhutto from office but also subjected him to a trial that mocked due process. He was executed in 1979 (Schofield 1980).

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was a leader whose populism was an amalgam of left and right populism. He talked about socialism. True to his slogan of roti, kapra, aur makan, his signature policy was the nationalization of the economy. All his life, he was castigated by the right-wing, and they were instrumental in his downfall and murder. However, he also talked about the glory of Islam, otherized "Hindu" India, and promoted pan-Islamic identity. The two highpoints in his prime ministership were the unanimous approval of the 1973 Constitution, which declared Islam as Pakistan's state religion and had numerous Islamic references, and the convening of the Organization of Islamic Conference's (OIC) second summit in Lahore in 1974, when he

managed to get most leaders of Muslim-majority countries—many of who were destabilizing each other—together on one stage. Was he a left populist or a religious populist? It is difficult to state definitively.

Zia's Military Coup, Religious Nationalism, and Islamisation

Military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq ruled Pakistan for eleven years (1977-88) and ushered in a phase in which religious nationalism was fully espoused as the state narrative. He instigated a period of Islamization the likes of which Pakistan had never seen before—and hasn't seen since. He uplifted right-wing Islamist parties to counter democratization and in exchange promised to introduce the Nizam-e-Mustafa (Snellinger, 2018). Left-wing parties, women, and human rights workers protesting the regime were curbed by state security forces and otherization and were exposed to ferocious outbursts of right-wing mobs. Television, radio, press, school syllabi, and other institutions promoted Islamic values and a spirit of jihadism.

Numerous amendments based on conservative interpretations of Islam were made to the constitution.[7] For instance, the Federal Shariat Court was established. This court could declare any law unconstitutional if it deemed the law un-Islamic (Yilmaz, 2014). In this court, religious clergy served as judges and decided matters in the light of the Quran and Sunnah (Kennedy, 1990). The Soviet-Afghan war next door further added to the narrative of Islamic nationalism. Pakistan's alliance with the US was termed as a "jihad" to defeat the "godless" Soviets (Lodhi, 2012). The Afghan war also brought petrol-dollars from the Gulf, resulting in the funding of many madrassas where jihadists were trained, creating even more of an audience with an appetite for Islamism (Lodhi, 2012).

Zia's use of religious nationalism has in many ways shaped contemporary politics and populist rhetoric. However, Zia was not a populist. Although Pakistan's other two long-term military dictators, Ayub and Musharraf, thought themselves as popular leaders, Zia knew better. He instrumentalized Islam, used the US and Arab support, and plied Pakistan's military to brutally oppress the opposition—but he never thought he could win elections. The best evidence of this, is the referendum question he drafted in 1984 to get himself another five-year presidential term. The ballot paper asked voters: "Do you endorse the process initiated by the President of Pakistan, General Mohammad Ziaul Haq, for bringing the laws of Pakistan in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and for the preservation of the ideology of Pakistan, and are you in favour of continuation and further consolidation of that process and for the smooth and orderly transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people?" Citizens could then vote "yes" or "no" (Aziz, 2015). He was not asking people to vote for him. He was asking people to vote for Islamisation, for the preservation of Pakistan's ideology, and for the ending of martial law and the return of democracy. It would have been difficult even for people who hated Zia to vote "no."

Pakistan is still grappling with the impacts of Islamic nationalism installed by both Zia and his predecessors. As the country's institutional fabric, such as the legal system and parliamentary forums, have embraced sharia-inspired ideals, religious populism is now a matter of political success and survival (Aziz, 2015). At a micro level the social fabric of society has also been altered. The region that once perplexed the British due its diversity is increasingly pushing towards a homogeneous society where religion (Sunni Islam) and nationalism are knotted together.

Muslim League-N Chief, Nawaz Sharif awards the ticket of NA-172 constituency to Hafiz Abdul Karim during meeting in Lahore on October 30, 2010. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan

Populism after Zia

General Zia-ul-Haq's regime came to an end when he was killed in an air crash in 1988. After nearly a decade under Zia's control, the country had the opportunity to hold democratic elections. Misgovernance, corruption, institutional clashes, and poor economic management led to highly unstable conditions that threatened the survival of the fragile democracy. Four elections were held between 1988 to 1999; governmental control alternated between the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).

During the "infant" or "fragile" democratic phase, religious populism was repeatedly used by politicians and parties to consolidate support. The PPP was now led by Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the former prime minster Z. A. Bhutto. Like her father, the young Bhutto relied on reformist populism to galvanise voters. Her slogan, borrowed from her father's campaign: roti, kapra, makan touched a nerve with the working class and poverty-stricken masses (Sekine, 1992). Bhutto's lineage as the daughter of the first democratically elected head of state further added to her appeal—in Pakistan, dynastic politics is the norm (Sekine, 1992). Educated at Oxford, Bhutto was viewed as a modernist who had ambitions of developing the country and ending its reliance on Islamic populism (Sekine, 1992).

Her brand of populism was countered by the religious populism of Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N. Sharif was one of the conservative political protégés that Zia had cultivated to retain his power (BBC, 2018). During PML-N's two terms in office, the party relied heavily on religious populism. In opposition to the PPP, PML-N members frequently "otherized" Bhutto by using Islamist populism. Fatwas were issued questioning the legitimacy of her government; the mullahs felt a woman heading an "Islamic" country was sinful (Azeem, 2020). Attacks such as these forced Bhutto to hide overt markers of femininity—for example, she hid her pregnancy during her first election campaign by wearing loose-fitting clothes(Khan, 2018).

Moving beyond religiously infused, populist sexism, Bhutto was portrayed as an "agent of the West," placing her in opposition to "the people." Her position against Zia's Islamised legacy, criticism of radicalization of youth, promotion of "un-Islamic" programs such as family planning, and her affiliation with the Shia sect of Islam made her a prime target of the right-leaning PML-N and radical religious groups (Azeem, 2020). Eventually, she was forced into a self-imposed exile. After Bhutto's second government was dissolved, Nawaz Sharif faced no real political opposition; thus, the clientelism between the state and religious factions continued (Javid, 2019; Puri, 2010).

Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf's Military Coup

A fourth military-led coup deposed the second Sharif government in 1999. Going into self-imposed exile, the Sharif family sought refuge with long-time ally, the house of Saud. General Pervez Musharraf, like his predecessors from the military, sought control to "stabilize" the country. Unlike Zia, the Musharraf regime did not rely on religious populism. After nearly two decades as a refuge for international Islamist terrorists, Pakistan was under immense pressure to reform. The terrorist attack of 9/11 triggered the American-led "war on terror" in Afghanistan. The changing mood in the White House defined the Musharraf regime's actions. Pakistan's status as an ally in the "war on terror" ensured that the cash-starved state could sustain itself on incoming foreign funds[8] (Ibrahim, 2009). The "carrot and stick" model, masterfully employed by the US, ensured that Pakistan complied with its demands in return for a monetary reward. The rekindled Pakistan-US alliance temporarily quashed the use of religious populism within the Pakistani government.

The Musharraf government's crackdown on terrorist hubs on the Pakistan-Afghan border, school-curriculum reforms, madrasa regulation efforts, economic liberalization, and banning of terrorist outfits (parties, groups, and non-government organizations (NGOs)) were welcomed but were not fully achieved or implemented (Afzal, 2014; Morgan, 2011; Looney, 2008). The noose tightening around the necks of radical groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TPL)—after years of direct or indirect support from the state—led them to rebel. The Musharraf tenure ushered in one of the most violent periods in contemporary Pakistani history, where suicide bombings ravaged cities across Pakistan (Looney, 2008). The state's distance from religious populism was met with violence which brought the "war on terror" home.

The Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) episode, in 2006, exemplified the state's struggle to distance itself from radicalism and how the radicals pushed back with the use of violence and religious populism to gain public support. The mosque was serving as a madrassa where hundreds of students were radicalized and sent off to fight in places such as Kashmir and Afghanistan. The government laid siege to the complex and after months of failed attempts, a confrontation between the security forces and mosque residents left several devotees dead, injured, or arrested (Scroggins, 2012). The around-the-clock broadcasting of the event made it a national debate. Non-state factions (radical religious groups) used Lal Masjid as a rallying point. They recruited volunteer suicide bombers from across the country to attack the "tyrannical" and "puppet of the West" government that was "in cahoots" with the "kafirs[9]" (Scroggins, 2012).

The groups that felt pressure from the government's crackdown used religious populism to define religious extremists as "the people" while the state and its supporters became the enemy "other."[10] Local and international terrorist groups such as the Taliban (Pakistan or TLP), al-Qaeda, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and others orchestrated dozens of suicide bomb attacks all over Pakistan's major cities, killing thousands of people (mostly civilians and security forces) (Scroggins, 2012). Benazir Bhutto, on her return to Pakistan, also became a victim of the raging violence. She was killed in Rawalpindi (a twin city of the capital Islamabad) during a pre-election rally in 2007. It is widely believed that TLP was responsible for her death due to her anti-Mujahideed-e-Islam[11] stance and polices (The Economic Times, 2018).

A gradual shift to democracy

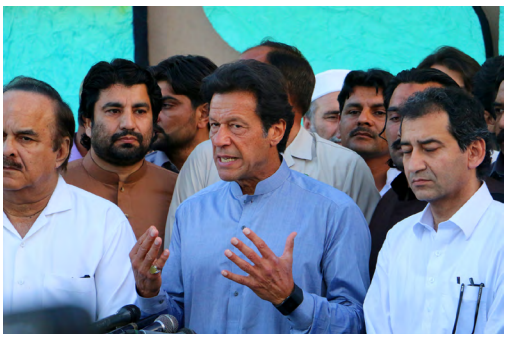
during the late 2000s and 2010s brought the PPP and PML-N back to power, respectively. While terrorist attacks had paralysed economic activity and terrified the public, the continued appeal of religious populism provided jihadi groups with a stream of fresh recruits. Within the seemly "non-radicalized" public, the debate of "good" versus "bad" Taliban was common. Middle class and educated individuals were also gravitating towards the Taliban's cause. Conspiracy theories regarding America, Zionism, Hinduism, etc., combined with years of Islamised content promulgated through media and the education system, caused large factions of the public to sympathise with the Taliban's fight against the Americans and Pakistan's "puppet" government (Siddiqui, 2018; Blair, Fair, Malhotra, & Shapiro, 2011).

The case surrounding Asia Bibi, which spanned nearly two decades, demonstrates the extent to which the prolonged use of populist Islamism by state and non-state actors has shaped the social fabric of Pakistani society. Asia Bibi[12] was falsely accused of blasphemy when a fight between her and her fellow fruit pickers escalated. Asia is a Christian Pakistani. She became the face of the plight of many non-Muslims and non-Sunnis, especially those who were harassed and/or killed by being roped into false blasphemy charges. The circumstantial evidence pointed towards her innocence, yet populist religious factions used their street power and violence to pressure the courts into handing down a death sentence and then prevented it from being revoked. In 2011, the liberal Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer,[13] was gunned down by his own security guard—a state-provided security officer—for publicly supporting Asia Bibi's predicament and stating that the blasphemy laws should be removed.

The killer, Mumtaz Qadri, shot Taseer 28 times in a busy market and in broad daylight. Qadri's arrest and confession was shocking. He was convinced that his actions were "heroic" and safeguarded the country against the ghustakh-e-rasool.[14] Video clips and pictures of him soon surfaced where he was seen smirking and sitting calmly reciting nats[15] and declaring his victory (BBC, 2011). More worrying than his individual behaviour was the reaction of a huge faction of the public. More than 300 lawyers volunteered to act as his defence and rallies raged throughout cities in support of Qadri (BBC, 2011). Sentenced to death by hanging, some of Qadri's last words to his supporters were, "distribute sweets when they hang me" (BBC, 2011). He is now immortalized as a ghazi and his resting place is a shrine and mosque complex in the vicinity of Islamabad (Pasha, 2016).

Asia, after nearly twenty years, was acquitted of the charges on October 31, 2018 by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. This was a bittersweet victory. This was not only justice delayed but also due safety concerns for Asia Bibi and her family, she had to seek asylum in Canada. Pakistan was no longer safe for her. The news of her release spread through the country like wildfire—a fire that engulfed every city and small village for four days. The destruction of public property, economic lockdown, theft, and vandalism left the country with an economic loss of 260 million PKR, in Punjab alone (Malik, 2018).

The master orchestrator of these protest was the Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TL), a party that gained momentum thanks to its populist Islamist rhetoric of "saving the pride and greatness of the Prophet." The vigilante group has massive support and has frequently hurt or aspired to kill those they deem as "blasphemers."[16] The vigilantes have now entered politics and, since 2018, their political party is called Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which won a stunning number of votes despite its first-time participation in general elections.



Imran Khan, addresses a press briefing on April 20, 2016 in Islamabad. Photo: Jahanzaib Naiyyer

Religious Populism and Imran Khan

Religious groups' use of the rhetoric of religious populism has helped them gain a key position in society and politics. The murshid (students/disciples)—or "the people"—of these "sacred" leaders are "defenders" of their faith. They demonstrate their loyalty to the pir (spiritual guide) by going against the misguided "liberals" and puppet governments. With the power of religious conviction, "the people" feel they are unstoppable. Their creation was facilitated by the encouragement and—at the time—tolerant behaviour of the government. The post-9/11 withdrawal of support and disowning of such factions has only led an intensifying of their use of religious populism and an expansion their networks through social media platforms (Anthony & Hussain, 2018; International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy, 2012). Religious populism is now a "must have" for politicians and parties hoping to win support and legitimacy. Recognizing the undeniable need for religious populism and simultaneously the government's need to reinvent its image in a more moderate light, a new wave of religious populism has taken root in Pakistani politics.

This new wave of religious populism is now part of mainstream politics—and is represented by Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.[17] Khan launched PTI in 1996 as a small, personality-driven party run by himself and several of his close friends and family members. However, since the early 2010s, it has been able to amass a huge following. PTI's has used various streaks of populism, including social-welfare, accountability, self-reliance, national revivalism, and religion. Following the 2018 elections, PTI has gained a majority in the federal parliament and most provincial assemblies. Religious populism is a core rhetoric of PTI and its leaders. Over the years, Khan and his party have overtly embraced Islamist populism; however, this is a more moderate and modest version compared to the radical Islam of orthodox groups and former dictators.

This "moderate" religious populism is advanced under the guise of "human rights." The earliest example is the "good" and the "bad" Taliban debate instigated by Khan. 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 a rational and pro-peace building party that believed in reforming and integrating the "good" Taliban back into society (Afzal, 2019; Mullah, 2017).

However, the antithesis to Khan's narrative was the tragic Army Public School (APS) attack in 2014. Nearly 130 innocent kids were ambushed and killed by the Taliban, in the city of Peshawar. Targeting defenceless children generated a consensus that the "good" Taliban was just a myth. But this has not stopped Khan and his team from positioning themselves as "peace loving Muslims" now that US troops are exiting Afghanistan. Under PTI leadership, the country is keen to play a positive role in stabilizing the region. It is again facilitating the integration of the Taliban into the democratic

system of Afghanistan on the same premise—that the Taliban is a legitimate political force that needs to be negotiated with rather than handled through force (The Hindu, 2021; Afzal, 2020).

PTI's reformist "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan) is an Islamist populist's utopia. Khan's election campaign of 2018 merged the ideologies of welfare-ism and Islamism: he modelled "New Pakistan" on the early structure of the state of Medina (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). Khan has repeatedly expressed his desire the follow the examples of the four rightly guided caliphs of Islam. In countless speeches, his "struggles" and actions against "the others" are quoted in references to the state of Medina and the period of the first four caliphs. This idealization has garnered PTI immense support in a deeply religious country where Medina and the Prophet Muhammad's life have unparalleled respect and devotion. In a way, Khan has re-packaged the dream of enforcing Nizam-e-Mustafa, the conservative slogan from the 1970s seeking the enforcement of Sharia laws. Now, under Khan, it more modern and "tolerant"—and in line with Pakistan's need to revamp its image on "moderate" lines.

The Islamic populism used by PTI is also civilizational. Khan won the hearts of most Pakistanis when he called out the previous governments for their close ties with the West. He specifically targeted the International Monitory Fund (IMF) and said he would not take a "begging bowl" to the Western nations because it made Pakistan's government a de facto "puppet" in their hands (Kari, 2019). Ironically, once in power, PTI was forced to take an IMF loan; however, the members were able to maintain their anti-West rhetoric on religious grounds. Through social media, Khan shares "good books" with the youth as highly recommended readings. Most of these books are related to discourses on Islam. Khan feels the youth need to be "re-educated" about their "roots" from a non-Western stance. He evokes extreme pride and sentimentality by using the works of the pan-Islamic national poet, Allam Iqbal, by calling them shahneen.[18] There is also an excessive emphasis on conspiracy theories such as the CIA creating the Taliban and the West's Machiavellian intentions towards Pakistan (Abbas, 2012).

Khan and the party have been highly un-sympathetic to the plight of factions that fall outside their Sunni-Muslim in-group, "the people." When the ethnically and religiously distinct Shia Hazara protesters refused to bury their dead after repeated deaths due to targeted terrorism, Khan said their right to protest was the victim's way of "blackmailing" him (Dawn, 2021). The government also washed its hands from assuming responsibility for an attack by conveniently blaming India for sponsoring terrorism in Pakistan (Dawn, 2021). Khan's Islamist populism also surfaced when he called the Aurat March's (Women' March) feminist slogans a "Western concept" and highly unnecessary in a Muslim society. He said that in Pakistan, women are highly protected and respected—claims that run contrary to statistical evidence on violence against women in the country (Dawn, 2020).

Khan's Islamist-infused populism also has a transnational element. His government has extensively collaborated with Turkey by introducing and popularizing TV serials with exceedingly Islamised content. The state's motivation to transmit Ertugrul Ghazi is the prime example of this transnational, Islam-inspired, civilizationalist populism (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a; Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b). PTI has repeatedly been proactive in highlighting its support for Muslims worldwide. Khan has felt the "ummah" needs to unite and that Islamophobia needs to be addressed; however, next to nothing is done when the rights of non-Sunnis and non-Muslims are violated in Pakistan on a daily basis (Shams, 2020).

Conclusion

The various instances and incidents of religious populism in Pakistan have shaped the identity of its people. Since its founding, religious populism has been employed by civil and military governments to consolidate their support and legitimize their actions. As a result, religious populism has become part and parcel of the Pakistani national imagination and identity.

The plurality that was once the crown of South Asia has now been brushed aside. Today's mostly homogenous citizens glorify Turkey's Islamist Erdogan and Muhammad bin Qasim and have disowned freedom fighters who faced down colonial forces such as Rani of Jhansi and Raja Ranjit Singh, labelling them as "infidel" others.

A void has been created by years of Islamic populism that has erased the collective memory of the Ganga-Gamani[19]identity—that of a pluralistic culture. Disengaged, misled, and misinformed, today's Pakistanis are Arabized and are now increasingly being Turkified—all at the expense of their South Asian heritage.

Religious parties and groups hold great political sway in the county. By using religious populism, these factions have been allowed to nurture their own "the people" who are partisan towards "the others." The weak level of governance, high political turmoil, and distrust in the country's institutional capabilities have pushed the public into the arms of religious populist groups.

Islamist civilizationism (Yilmaz, 2021) has allowed for "the people" to feel victimized by "the others," legitimizing their anger, resentment, and hatred. Unlike the Taliban, they do not take up arms against the enemy; rather, they harbour xenophobic and racist ideas towards anyone from the otherized groups or sympathetic to the "other's" ideals. Today, Islam is Pakistan, and a Muslim a Pakistani. "What is the meaning of Pakistan?" Most would answer, "la ilaha illallah muhammadur rasulullah."[20]

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[1] During Pakistan's independence movement, a very popular slogan was "Pakistan ka matlab kiya; la illah illalah," which means, "What is the meaning of Pakistan; I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah." The two verses rhyme and as most will realize, the second part of the verse is the first part of the Islamic shahada. This slogan is still very popular.

[2] Dalits are a caste within the Hindu system. Dalits are the most oppressed and marginalized caste and known as the "untouchables." Their social status historically prevented them for being an integrated and accepted part of mainstream Indian society. The move to elect a Dalit representative in 1947 was a progressive move to dispel centuries of religious caste-based oppression of the subclass.

[3] Fatima Jinnah played a critical role in the independence movement and was called madr-e-millat (mother of the nation). She was very popular, and Ayub was only able to defeat her because the elections were indirect and state power was used to Ayub's benefit.

[4] Many populist leaders cannot graduate to become effective managers or administrators. They struggle to govern as governance requires political compromises and logical evidence-based data analysis and decision-making. Donald Trump is the most recent example.

[5] In 1947, Pakistan had two wings that were not geographically contiguous. The east wing is current-day Bangladesh and west wing is current-day Pakistan. The two wings were separated by more than 2000km of Indian territory, and, ethno-linguistically, they were poles apart. The only common factor between the two was the religious identity of Islam. The West Pakistani elite, which dominated the military and bureaucracy, was unwilling to share power with the East's larger population and accept Bengali language and culture as equal.

[6] A catchy slogan, devised by the religious parties in the 1970s, that was vague enough to acceptable to Muslims of all hues. Its vagueness made it acceptable to all opposition parties many of whom were against implementation of Sharia laws or Sharia driven laws.

[7] The parliament was forced in 1985 to legalize/approve these changes in lieu of lifting of martial law.

[8] Estimates suggest that Pakistan received some 18 billion USD in military and economic aid from the US for its cooperation in the "War on Terror" from 2002–2011.

[9] Non-believers, in this case non-Muslims

[10] This version of religious populism was ferociously dangerous. The conviction of the people on a faith-based model made them ruthless towards the "others—who are judged kafirs and deemed worthy only of death.

[11] Translation: Warriors of Islam: radical, armed, Islamic militants

[12] Asia Bibi was a fruit picker form the district of Sheikhupura (some 30 miles outside of Lahore). Bibi and her family were, reportedly, the only Pakistani Christian family in the small village of Ittan Wali. Living as non-Muslims in a small town was not without challenges. After refusing "advice" to convert to Islam, she was accused of blasphemy in 2009. According to various accounts, a fight broke out between Asia and her fellow berry pickers wile harvesting falsa berries (which are harvested in the hottest month of the year). The fight is said to have started over Asia drinking water from the same glass as the Muslim women. After a heated argument, Asia was dismissed from the farm and falsely accused of blasphemy. In 2010, the local district court sentenced her to death under these charges.

[13] Taseer was an Anglo-Indian (with a Christian mother and a Muslim father). His identity as a Pakistani was not fully accepted by many who felt suspicious of his intentions due to his mixed-race background.

[14] Someone who commits blasphemy, in this case against the Prophet.

[15] Poems that praise Prophet Muhammad.

[16] After hearing a speech by TL leader, a young high school student killed his teacher in class on perceived blasphemy charges; then-leader Khadim Rizvi did not deny his role in the tragic incident.

[17] Pakistan League of Justice.

[18] Shaheen means a hawk. In Iqbal's poetry they symbolize the potential of Muslim youth. He felt that the Muslim youth were misguided and unaware of Islam's history and potential. If they embraced their historical roots and worked hard, they could excel in life as the apex creatures—the hawk, which knows no bounds and soars to great heights.

[19] The merger of Persian and Sanskrit culture that was a hybrid identity of Northern India.

[20] "I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."