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Military and Populism:

A Global Tour with a Special Emphasis on the Case of Pakistan

IHSAN YILMAZ
RAJA M. ALI SALEEM

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IHSAN YILMAZ is Research Professor and Chair of Islamic Studies and Inter- cultural Dialogue at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He has conducted research on nation-building; citizenship; ethnic-religious-political identities and their securitization (Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia); minority-majority relations (Australia, Turkey, the UK, and the USA); socio-legal affairs, identities, belonging and political participation of Muslim minorities in the West (the UK, Australia, and the USA); Islam-state-society relations in the majority and minority contexts; global Islamic movements; political Islam in a comparative perspective; Turkish politics; authoritarianization; Turkish diasporas (the UK, Australia, the USA); transnationalism; intergroup contact (Australia); and politics of victimhood (Australia, Turkey).

RAJA M. ALI SALEEM is an Associate Professor (Public Policy) at the Centre for Public Policy and Governance at Forman Christian College in Lahore, Pakistan. Dr. Saleem's research focuses on religious nationalism, the relationship between church and state, the politics of Muslim-majority countries, especially Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, local governments, public financial management, the role of the military in politics, and democratic consolidation.

ABSTRACT

Although populism has become a focus of research in the last decade, there hasn't been much academic work on how militaries around the world have reacted/acted to the rise of populist leaders. There is some timeworn research on the relationship of militaries in Latin America with various left-wing populist governments and leaders from the 1930s to 1970s. Given that populism was largely understood in the context of left-wing politics, with the rise of right-wing populism, the literature on the military and populism needs to be advanced by studying the relationship between right-wing populism and the military. This article aims to address this gap by looking at the right-wing populism case study of Pakistan, where the military has actively participated in the rise of a religious populist leader. To situate the case study within the larger literature of the military and populism, the dynamics and history of military associations with populism and populist leaders are revisited in the article's first part.

INTRODUCTION

Even though a lot has been written about populism and its relationship with numerous institutions of the state, the link between current populism(s) and the military remains mostly unexplored (see for recent exceptions, Yilmaz and Saleem, 2021; Hunter and Vega, 2022). This article addresses that gap, giving a brief overview of the relationship between the military and populism. Populism and left- and right-wing populisms are explained in the first part of this article. In the second part, different relationships between the military and populism are explored. The final part gives a brief historical summary of how the Pakistani military helped Prime Minister Imran Khan's populist party win elections against all odds in 2018 and has since helped govern the country.

Street posters in commemoration of the General Juan Domingo Peron death in Buenos Aires, Argentina on June 30, 2019. Photo: Alexandr Vorobev.

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Global politics is increasingly divided between "the people" who are galvanized against "the elite" and the "other." As populist leaders and parties exploit these divisions based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, and other socio-political constructs, societies are becoming are fractured (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2010; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Laclau, 2005). In the past, the concept was understood as something unique to Latin American politics, where left-wing populism predominated from the 1930s to the 1980s (Hawkins, 2010; Weyland, 2001). Even when there were populist leaders in other regions, they were rarely called or recognized as populists.

As populism rose in the twenty-first century, it has often been used as a right-wing narrative; some of the past explanations and theories were no longer useful. During the first two decades of this century, hundreds of articles have been written on how to define populism and attempting to understand what facilitates and maintains it.

The wave of Islamophobia post-September 11, increasing instability in the Middle East, and the resulting migration crises have led to populist ideas filtering into politics. In Europe, the Five Star Movement in Italy has vehemently opposed immigration and has repeatedly expressed its concerns with Islam (Fieschi, 2019; Mosca & Calderoni, 2012; Casertano, 2012). Its right-wing agenda has caught the increasing attention of many: the movement presents itself as the legitimate "volonté générale" of the true and pure Italian "people" against the "intruders."

In a similar fashion, secular India—the world's largest democracy—and its multicultural traditional is under increasing threat from the "saffron tide" of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Saleem et al, 2022). The BJP government has used the populist ideological approach to divide the country based on religious lines: "the people" are Hindus and "the others" are Muslims and Christians (Hameed, 2020; Hansen, 1999).

As populism is a thin ideology, it can partake in both left-wing and right-wing ideas. Populist leaders attack the "corrupt elite" from both left and right. Their plans and policies can be a messy blend of left-wing and right-wing—and at times contradictory—ideas. The following section gives a brief overview of left-wing and right-wing populism.

LEFT-WING POPULISM

Left-wing populism casts the "elites" as "the others" who have illegitimately seized power from "the people." Left-wing populists want to return power to "the people" and re-balance society (Moffitt, 2016: 12-3). In practice, their policies differ from classical Marxists or socialists. Left-wing populists are closer to the concept of "populist socialism," a hybrid of five elements: radical nationalism; a radical mood; populism; anti-capitalism; and a moderate form of socialism (Martin, 2012).

Earlier agrarian movements organically faded away in the early twentieth century. It was not until the rise of the left wing in the twentieth century that the term populism was extensively explored. Latin America, in particular, underwent a rapid political transformation and saw the rise of populist governments and dictatorships. A blend of style, ideology, strategy, and discourse was used by populist leaders, such as Júan Peron in Argentina, Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Peru, to gain popularity. With the help of personal charisma combined with the rhetoric of anti-elitism, these leaders amassed a huge amount of public support. Latin American politics was thus known as "populist"—gaining the support of "the people" by harbouring feelings of "popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a...ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly on power, property, breeding, and culture" (Shils, 1956: 100-101).

Left-wing populists gained prominence in twentieth-century Latin America, but they were not limited to the Western hemisphere, and many leaders in Asia and Africa adopted populist rhetoric and policies (Young, 1982). Many populist leaders of that era, such as Kwame Nkrumah, are still revered in their countries today. With the help of personal charisma and anti-elite rhetoric, which was directed at not only local elites but also international elites (Western governments and international companies primarily controlled by the West), these leaders became very popular. Neo-colonialism was regularly arranged by these leaders, and anti-globalization was part of the African and Asian left-wing populist repertoire.

With the fall of the communist bloc in the 1990s, both Marxism and left-wing populism saw a decline in popularity. There was the gradual, widespread acceptance of liberal democracy and neo-liberal economics.

Populism—on the left but especially the right—would return in the first decade of the 21st century. March and Mudde (2005) term this new surge in populism as "social populism," a doctrine rooted in principles of "correct" and "fair" class politics and that seeks to establish an egalitarian society that is for the "proletarian" and has elements of "anti-elitism." The "social populist"

movement found support following the global financial crisis of 2008 when it emerged along with various other political movements that sought to "fix" the "broken" system (Augustin, 2020: 5-6; Gandesha, 2018). The new wave of left-wing populists is democratic, unlike its twentieth-century predecessors, yet it uses similar ideological strategies, discourses, and style.

RIGHT-WING POPULISM

At the opposite end of the spectrum, global politics is undergoing a surge in right-wing populism. As opposed to its left-wing form, right-wing populism is rooted in ideas of "the pure," religious "righteousness," "nativism," and a "sacred" right to "native" land (Haynes, 2020; Lobban et al. 2020; Röth, Afonso & Spies, 2017). "The people" increasingly feel it is their right to protect their culture and values from the "others." These "others" are a wide variety of groups, based on ethnicity, language, race, religion, etc. For instance, in Central Europe, people who believe European civilization is a "Christian civilization" view Muslims as a threat, "outsiders" who are unable and/or unwilling to integrate. Haynes (2020:1) points out, "As Muslims are not capable, so the argument goes, of assimilating to European or American norms, values, and behaviour, then they must be excluded or strongly controlled for the benefit of nativist communities. Right-wing populists in both the USA and Europe pursue this strategy because they see it as chiming well with public opinion at a time of great uncertainty, instability, and insecurity."

Along with this "Christian" civilizational, right-wing populist ideology—with Muslims as the outsiders—right-wing populists also sometimes engage in anti-Semitism and misogyny, are staunchly anti-immigrant, homophobic, and anti-EU and anti-globalization (Haynes, 2020; Lobban et al. 2020; Röth, Afonso & Spies, 2017). Thus, the discourse is built on a distrust of "outsiders" who are not part of the "true" culture.

Former US President Donald Trump entered the White House with the help of this right-wing populism. Trump's brand of populism heavily relies on notions of Judeo-Christian—although unlike his running mate, Mike Pence, he did not clearly identify with the dominant and deep-seated emotions in the Bible Belt and beyond. He has constantly supported the idea of a Judeo-Christian civilization and has shown an aversion to "others"—even, paradoxically, including Mexican immigrants who are mostly Christians (Hosey, 2021; Mudde, 2021; Espenshade, 2020). The January 6th attack on the US Capitol has shown Trump's encouragement of and tolerance for domestic far-right terrorist groups that are part of a radical right in America (Mudde, 2021).

Beyond Europe and the Western world, right-wing populists have also prospered and even gained power in Asia and Africa. Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, has used a right-wing ensemble of Hindu nationalism and populism for over two decades and has essentially altered

the social fabric of India (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020; Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017: 184; Saleem et al, 2022). During Modi's first and second tenure as Prime Minister, the Hindutva ideology—and Modi's populism—engulfed not only the politics, but also the psyche, of Indian society. From revoking the autonomy of Indian-held Kashmir to instigating security forces' violence against student protestors across India to the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Modi-led BJP has used Hindutva and populism to engulf the brains and bodies of ordinary Hindus (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020; Saleem et al, 2022). Next door in South Asia, Imran Khan has also used Islamist populism (Shakil and Yilmaz, 2021)—and the power of the military (to be discussed in detail later)—to gain power in Pakistan. He invites people to a new Pakistan that is a modern version of Prophet Muhammad's state, called the Riyasat-e-Madina.

Beyond ideology and discourse, right-wing populism has also been used in a performative sense as a style and as a strategy. Modi's use of the sacred saffron colour, Khan's habit of carrying around prayer beads, Trump holding the Bible before ordering peaceful protesters to be shelled with tear gas, and Erdogan's habit of crying while reciting the Qur'an are various strategy- and style-based right-wing populist tactics to evoke propitious, favourable emotions in "the people."

The divisional lines between right- and left-wing populism are not always clear cut. For instance, the idea of anti-elitism can also be espoused by any populist. Leaders such as Modi and Erdogan have been using their humble beginnings to position themselves as a voice or of the common, working-class people. Thus, Erdogan calling himself a Black Turk (as opposed to an elite White Turk) and Modi referring himself as a chaye wala (tea seller) are symbolic gestures to highlight their working-class roots and deep relationship with an average Turkish or Indian citizen (Sen, 2019).

On the other hand, Mette Frederiksen and her party, the Social Democrats, in Denmark are proponents of left-wing values such as strong welfarism. Yet, in recent years, even when in power, the party has taken an anti-immigration stance which is traditionally a right-wing policy (Al Jazeera, 2019; Nedergaard, 2017). The party justifies its move by rationalizing, "As Social Democrats, we believe that we must help refugees, but we also need to be able to deliver results in Denmark via local authorities and for the citizens. [...] We have therefore been tightening asylum rules and increased requirements for immigrants and refugees. And we will continue to pursue a tight and consistent asylum policy, which makes Denmark geared to handling refugee and migratory pressures" (Nedergaard, 2017).

THE MILITARY AND POPULISM

While populism is largely a political ideology, when institutional boundaries are weak, the military can fall prey to populism, too. Some characteristics of populism endear the military to it while others make the military oppose it. Military men and women, being part of a bureaucracy and an institution working under strict rules and regulations, often dislike political manoeuvring and manipulation; they may be drawn to populists who commonly talk in simple, straight language and are not ready to spare those who they think are enemies of the nation. Although populist leaders do make deals and change their opinions based on what is politically feasible (such as Trump's change of opinion about abortion), they project themselves as straight shooters, not politicians. This apparent dislike for political expediency is also appealing.

However, there are also many points of disagreement between the military and populists. Populists generally oppose wars and foreign interventions, as they take money away from domestic welfare programs. Many populists propose cutting defence budgets to increase domestic welfare spending. Most populist leaders are also anti-science or lack basic scientific knowledge. Trump, Modi, and Khan have said many things that would make a 10th-grader laugh. This makes populist leaders difficult partners for the military, home to the most sophisticated technologies available.

Nasserist party supporters hold signs and pictures of Gamal Abdel Nasser during first anniversary of Egypt's uprising in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt on January 25, 2012. Photo: Tom Bert.

POPULIST GENERALS

There are many types of relationships between the military and populism. The most direct would be a coup leader himself becoming a populist. It is uncommon today, but in the 20th century, generals did transform themselves into populists after successful coups to gain legitimization and support. Perhaps the most famous left-wing populist general was the Argentinian Júan Peron, who became the face of socialist populism (Calvo, 2021; Gillespie, 2019). During his two terms in office, Peron was able to amass popular support through welfare and pro-labour policies combined with nationalization (Gillespie, 2019). While in the short term these benefited the Argentinian people, the government was unable to support such measures in the long run when combined with the growing military oligarchy in the country. "Peron used the presidency to maintain support for the military through modernization and promotion projects. [...] Perón removed generals when he saw them as troublesome and promoted the generals who supported him instead" (Calvo, 2021). This clientelism between the military elite was used by Peron to prolong his "iron first" populist rule over Argentina (he ruled from 1946-55 and again from 1973-74).

Similarly, in Mexico too, General Lázaro Cárdenas (in power from 1934-40) adopted socialist populist policies that led to major improvements in the economy and also general welfare, as he touted issues such as affirmative action for indigenous groups and women's rights (Philip,

2000). By mobilizing the rural poor and urban middle class, Cárdenas dominated Mexican politics with socialist ideas, but his military background led his government to assume the posture and course of populist authoritarianism (Philip, 2000). Left-wing populism was also adopted by many military coup leaders in Africa, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt (ruled 1956-70), Ben Bella (ruled 1962-65) in Algeria, and Thomas Sankara (ruled 1983-87) in Burkina Faso. Some of these generals "thickened" their populism with nationalism and transnationalism. Nasser was traditionally a left-wing populist leader, yet he used the ideas of pan-Arabism to create not only a national identity for Egypt but for Arabs around the Middle East.

Right-wing populist generals are not uncommon. These populist generals have promoted nativism, militant nationalism, an aggressive stance against immigrants, minorities, and outsiders, and a "my country first" policy. The Greek "regime of the colonels" in the late 1960s and early 1970s was an example of right-wing military leaders employing populism. The regime coined the slogan, "Greece for Christian Greeks," and its leaders frequently talked about one Greek people and nation. They also talked about a "national renaissance" to resurrect Greece, which was compared to a patient on her deathbed (Couloumbis, 1974; Xydis, 1974).

MILITARY SUPPORT FOR / OPPOSITION TO POPULISTS

Most of the time, the military supports or opposes populists but does not directly intervene in a country's governance. Populists—who want to change the decades-old way of doing politics—usually need or feel the need to have this indirect support. Supporting populists indirectly allows the military to protect its interests, such as regular increases in military expenditures, as well as increase its political power.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro during 74th Anniversary of Parachutist Infantry Battalion held at Military Village in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on November 23, 2019. Photo: Celso Pupo

The military's support for left-wing populist leaders primarily comes from the mid-century period in Latin America. During the twentieth century, militaries in numerous countries supported left-wing populists. Brazilian President and dictator Getulio Vargas (1930-45 and 1951-54) came into power supported by the Brazilian military. He adopted a wide array of social and political policies that benefited labour, workers, and women, and the Brazilian military continued to support him even when he disbanded Congress and suspended the constitution (Green, Langland, & Schwarcz, 2019: 321-4).

Some left-wing populists have been opposed by the military. Paz Estenssoro, a left-wing Bolivian leader, who came to power with the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement, stayed in power from the 1950s to 1980s. His rhetoric was anti-elitism and targeted the ruling military elite. "In the revolution of April 1952, the worker and peasant masses defeated the oligarchy's military," and he established a rule which led to the rapid nationalization of resources (Funke, Schularick & Trebesch, 2020: 85).

Militaries supporting right-wing populism have become more common. One of the reasons might be the changing nature of the military vis-à-vis society in the decolonized world. Earlier, the military in most developing countries was a modernizing force as it had education, scientific knowledge, and regular interaction with other militaries. Numerous military coups led to land reforms and less power for the religious right. By the end of the 20th century, most militaries in these countries had become status-quo-supporting organizations.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, a right-wing "strongman" populist, has been able to garner support through his "tough" actions against "druggies," "militants," "radicals," etc. (Dizon, 2020). Duterte's

"action" oriented strategy to "crush" the bad guys has led him to use penal populism. His aggressive policies are supported by the military, on whom he has relied heavily for cracking down "undesirables" (Dizon, 2020).

Another instance of a right-wing populist leader being supported by the military comes from Latin America. In Brazil, conservative, populist President Jair Bolsonaro has appointed military officers to key technocratic, political, and bureaucratic positions. One figure suggests that "individuals with military experience have occupied almost half of all cabinet seats since 2019, including President Jair Bolsonaro himself as well as retired army general and current vice president Hamilton Mourão" (Scharpf, 2020).

Finally, right-wing populists have been opposed by the military in some countries. For nearly eight decades, the modern Turkish Republican was dominated by the Kemalist military elite that advanced a reformist agenda to modernize and secularize the country. After the right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, the Kemalist military launched a series of attacks on the AKP. This led to what the AKP called a "digital coup" against them when the Kemalist military questioned the AKP's nationalism and loyalty as being counter to the constitutional spirit of the country (Elver, 2014). Between 2010 and 2020, the AKP became increasingly populist and used its increasing power to constitutionally limit the Kemalist military elite from interfering.

From this brief survey, it is evident that in developing countries where mass mobilization takes place on populist grounds, the military is likely to get involved directly or indirectly in state affairs due to the power vacuum left by politicians. The armed forces are either part of "the elite" that the populist wave rises against, or they are direct agents of "the people" or supporters of those who claim to represent "the people."

CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN

Pakistan is no stranger to military involvement in civilian matters (Amin, Qurban & Siddiqa, 2020; Taj, Shah & Ahmad, 2016; Hussain, 2012). The country witnessed its first military coup in 1958, hardly a decade after its formation in 1947. From the late 1950s to the late 2000s, the country experienced four successful military coups and numerous unsuccessful ones. Pakistanis lived nearly half of those seven decades under military dictatorships (1958-1971, 1977-1988, and 1999-2008). Over the years the military has not only deposed democratically elected leaders but forced them into exile—and in the case of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, organized his execution (Amin, Qurban & Siddiqa, 2020; Taj, Shah & Ahmad, 2016).

Since the last dictatorship, the military has adopted a covert approach regarding its involvement in politics. They have tried to manage Pakistani politics from backstage. The fame, power, and charisma of Imran Khan, a famous sportsman and philanthropist, has allowed the military to browbeat the two most popular parties in the country. With the rise of populism, Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party (see in detail, Yilmaz and Shakil, 2021a; Yilmaz and Shakil, 2021b; Yilmaz and Shakil 2021c) and the military have cooperated repeatedly and projected themselves as the "defenders" or "the voice" of "the people" against the malicious "others." Imran Khan's journey to the country's power corridors is closely tied to his relationship with the military. Khan's PTI, however, has gone through various stages before becoming fully immersed with the military. Due to the changing dynamics of the relationship, we have divided Khan's journey into various chronological periods.

YEARS OF WARM NON-ENGAGEMENT (1996-2001)

The PTI was founded as an anti-elite and anti-corruption party that sought to bring social justice to the disenfranchised people of Pakistan. In its early stages, the party was welfarist and reformist in its ideas. It wanted to make politics "for the people," as a break from conventional politics which was increasingly dynastic and self-centred. The party's non-political background meant it had to work from the grassroots to ensure its political presence in a country where family and baradari (tribe or caste) ties play a key role in politics (Shah, 2020; Mushtaq, Ibrahim & Qaleem, 2013; Lancaster, 2003). During its initial years, the PTI was not a fixture on the political landscape other than Khan, its chairman, making headlines for issuing pro-people statements due to this social status as a former Pakistani cricketer. Abbas (2019) correctly notes that in its early years, the PTI was not seen as a political party but rather viewed as an Imran Khan fan club or a social justice movement; its membership was confined to the upper middle class and affluent members of society who wanted to play a proactive role in politics.

Pervez Musharraf.

The PTI's pro-establishment stance positioned it close to the military when General Musharraf deposed the sitting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In Khan's view, elite's corrupt and incompetent leadership had come to an end, and Musharraf's progressive ideals would benefit the country. During this period, the relationship between the PTI and the military was cordial. Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, a charity founded by Khan, even was donated $500,000 by Musharraf in 2002 (Arab News, 2019).

ANTAGONISTIC RELATIONSHIP (2002-10)

The distant yet pleasant relationship between the regime and the PTI took a turn in 2002. Musharraf offered Khan a significant role in politics and a large number of seats in the 2002 national elections but, in turn, Khan had to support a large group of corrupt politicians. To his credit, Khan refused, and the PTI only won one seat in the 2002 military-rigged elections. Musharraf's embrace of the corrupt and religious parties—including the KP, PTI's political rival—turned Khan into a bitter rival. Khan also became a fierce critic of the Pakistani military's role in the "war on terror" in Afghanistan. For nearly a decade, Khan increasingly became the face of resistance towards US-led or promoted operations in Pakistan's rural tribal areas.

Khan's opposition to the army's activities and the Musharraf regime led to him being put on house arrest several times (Indurthy, 2004). In 2007, Khan and his party also publicly opposed the regime's efforts to evacuate a hub of extremists from the Red Mosque in Islamabad (Samiuddin, 2018). Crucially, the PTI chose to remain silent on the issue of extremism being spread by the militants and radicals at the mosque and instead chose to criticize the draconian measures taken by the Musharraf-led government to dislocate the militants from the mosque complex. Later on, Khan was one of the leaders of the movement for the restoration of the Chief Justice of Pakistan, who was unconstitutionally sacked by Musharraf. It was this movement and the murder of Benazir Bhutto that resulted in the fall of Musharraf in 2008-9.

CLOSE ALIGNMENT (2011-17)

With Musharraf in exile and The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leading governments at the federal and provincial level, there was little hope for the PTI. Khan's original supporters were long gone, and the PTI was unable to make a dent in the political arena. Similarly, the military was looking for partners to increase its clout after the undignified ouster of Musharraf. So, it seems that the two most probably decided to strike a deal. There aren't signed papers but there is enough circumstantial evidence of the PTI's support for the military and vice versa. The prime piece of evidence is the shift in the PTI's "other." While Khan was still passionately leading rallies and pointing out policy issues regarding the war on terror, the overall target of the party's criticism was not the military but the "Western nations" which, according to Khan, had engulfed the Muslim nations into war (Dawn, 2013). Khan's support of the Afghan mujahideen and his increasing focus on the "good" Taliban drew international criticism (Boone, 2014).

Gradually, the calls for accountability were targeted at the political elite,

leaving the military out of the PTI's retributive politics. While it's true that civilian politicians such as the Sharifs and Bhutto-Zardaries had amassed fortunes by misusing their offices, so, too, had the military elite; generals became multi-millionaires (Siddiqa 2017). Yet PTI's accountability was partisan: it sought a return of the looted wealth only from the civilian governments. The military supported Khan by providing him allies and ensuring favourable media coverage. Because of political deals and Khan's alliance with the military, the PTI's position became hypocritical. Khan spoke about those who were killed by the Western militaries in Afghanistan and refused to condemn the Taliban, who were also involved in killing innocent Afghans. While he drew excessive focus to the police brutality of the PML-N government against various protestors, such as at the Model Town incident in 2014, there was no mention the lives lost due to various military operations in the country's western regions.

The PTI had always prided itself as a pro-democracy party, yet it did not object to the constitutional amendments that went against the democratic spirit of the country. For example, Khan did not raise an objection to the controversial 21stConstitutional Amendment, which was passed in 2015 (Amin, Qurban & Siddiqa, 2020; The News; 2014).

Muslim League-N President, Nawaz Sharif addresses PML-N workers during meeting in Peshawar, Pakistan on September 16, 2011. Photo: Asianet-Pakistan.

Because of this amendment, the military could set up its own courts that could try civilians if they were deemed "terrorists." As the 2018 elections grew closer, Pakistan went through major political developments when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was disqualified from office after a prolonged court case. It was very difficult to believe that this verdict did not have the military's support, as Military Intelligence (MI) and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were major witnesses against the sitting PM. This sent into motion an openly bitter relationship between the military and the PML-N. The latter blamed the military for interfering with politics, as the exiled Sharif made speeches blaming the "aliens" or "deep state" that targeted him and his family through their "proxy," the PTI (Dawn, 2018). Sharif went on the offensive and called out the military leadership for their constant interference in matters of the state while simultaneously labelling the PTI as the military's "puppet" government (Dawn, 2020).

SUPPORT DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ON ELECTION DAY (2017-18)

By the end of the PML-N tenure, the party had suffered major setbacks. The PTI was the talk of the town and sought vengeance for the country's "wronged" people. The PTI attacked the political elite, and its populist rhetoric resonated with the population, which felt failed by successive corrupt governments. The PTI emerged victorious in the National Assembly and in three provincial assemblies.

The PML-N, after its defeat, accused the PTI of using military support to rig elections to secure its victory. While the PML-N was a bitter loser, there was some truth in the allegations. For instance, in the July 2018 elections, the Pakistani Army had deployed over 371,000 troops to "secure" polling stations, and the counting of votes was delayed for several hours (Khan, 2018; Panda, 2018). While the presence of the military at voting stations was not new in a country where security has been a prolonged issue, there were worrying reports about the integrity of the election (Abi-Habib & Masood, 2018; Khan, 2018). Even before the election, various PML-N candidates issued statements claiming that they were being harassed by security forces and that their campaign headquarters were targeted (Abi-Habib & Masood, 2018). The allegations were profound enough that the spokesperson for the military, Major General Asif Ghafoor, had to address them during a press conference, where he brushed the allegations aside (Abi-Habib & Masood, 2018; Panda, 2018).

Following its electoral victory, the PTI revealed a plan to address the nation's issues in 100 days. While most of the PTI's campaign promises remain unfulfilled—and the party even reversed some of its positions—it is worth noting that a large number of former Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q) or pro-Musharraf/military political members have become part of Khan's core team (Abbasi, 2018). At least 13 core ministries were handed out to former PML-Q members, or those who had served in an advisory capacity to Musharraf (Abbasi, 2018).

Support For PM Imran Khan (2018-21)
In office, Imran Khan has been an enthusiastic supporter of the military. A huge change in his previous stance was visible when a court announced a public hanging sentence for Musharraf for disrespecting and violating the constitution between 1999 to 2008 (Geo News 2019). In 2014, Khan himself urged the judiciary to do justice by not allowing Musharraf to escape trial (Ilyas, 2014). Once the 2019 verdict came down, Khan explicitly called the judge "mentally ill" for using such a "harsh" verdict as the Prime Minister felt it insulted the institution of the military (Shahzad, 2019). Khan gave a full three-year extension to the current Army Chief, after his normal three-year tenure ended in 2019, although previously Khan himself (and others) had publicly declared that giving Army Chiefs extensions undermines democracy (Philip 2019; Afzal, 2019). In, 2021 the PTI government passed another bill aimed at supporting the

military. Under this new bill, anyone who criticizes the military will be tried under section 500A of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC); the accused could face two years of jail time and/or a fine of up to 500,000PKR, or roughly 3,270USD (The News, 2021).

In addition to supporting legislative changes that bolster the military, Khan has openly talked about a "5th generation warfare" and the opposition's "seditious" attempts. The government, with the help of the military, has registered numerous cases on major opposition figures and has used an anti-corruption agency to keep opposition leaders terrified and/or in jail. Khan and the military's top brass have used the populist rhetoric of threats from "within" and "outside" the country to browbeat the political opposition (Butt, 2021; Sareen 2020). Both have synchronized efforts to portray the opposition as friends of India and the "enemy" of Pakistan, ensuring they're viewed with suspicion while the PTI and military are viewed as the "protectors of the nation."

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates the partnership between a populist leader and a country's military leadership that allows the latter to play a covert role in politics. In Pakistan, the military has always been closely tied with politics. It has been deemed a necessary evil that is there to protect the people from the "incompetent political elite" or to defend the country against its many "enemies." These notions have helped construct an image of the military as a "reliable" political actor who is normally incorruptible. However, with growing concerns in civil society over repeated military regimes, the military apparatus changed its form of involvement in politics. Rather than imposing martial law and becoming a pariah on the international stage, it decided to co-opt a populist party and "help" it form a government. The PTI government now provides the generals with the necessary leverage and cover through its verbal, legal, and legislative power while the military provides Khan and his PTI with political space to run the country even when its performance is pitiful and the opposition is numerically strong. Both get what they want while also maligning the opposition as "traitors" and "enemies of the people."

The Pakistani case study is informative. It tells a story that can easily happen elsewhere in the developing world. A military, having staged many successful coups and accustomed to unconstitutional powers, looks to keep or increase its illegal powers against the onslaught of political parties, without imposing martial law. Thus, it decides to back a populist party, which is unable to challenge the control of the established parties on its own. Separately, both the military and the populist party may not succeed, but, using each other, they manage to take control of the government.

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POPULISM STUDIES

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR POPULISM STUDIES (ECPS)
ADRESS: 155 WETSTRAAT / RUE DE LA LOI 1040 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
EMAIL: ECPS@POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG
PHONE: +32 24658318
WWW.POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG