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Manufacturing Civilisational Crises: Instrumentalisation of Anti-Western Conspiracy Theories for Populist Authoritarian Resilience in Turkey and Pakistan

IHSAN YILMAZ
KAINAT SHAKIL

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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).

KAINAT SHAKIL is a non-resident Research Associate at the European Center for Populism Studies. Her research explores populism from the perspectives of religion, emotions, and gender. The regional focus of her work is mainly Pakistan and demographically Muslim-majority countries.

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the importance of 'crisis events' used by leaders employing populist civilisational populism in Muslim democracies. While populism is widely acknowledged and studied, various aspects remain unexplored. One feature is how populists make use of a crisis. While populists do benefit from social and political rifts, this paper goes a step further and argues that civilisationalist populists create imaginary and exaggerated 'crises' to sustain and prolong their relevance/position in power as well as justify their undemocratic actions. Using the case studies of Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdogan) and Pakistan (Imran Khan) allows for a comparison to be drawn between two different leaders seeking to maintain power by using their position to either create civilizationalist crises or to frame ordinary crises as civilisational. The findings highlight that despite different political scenarios and

outcomes, both these populist leaders gained political support by creating crises. We find that in most cases, populists exaggerate pre-existing insecurities and events to their benefit. The overblown claims and conspiratorial scenarios aid populists in creating a niche for their narratives by reaffirming their populist categorisation of societies. At the same time, the findings bring forth the troubling issues of the social-political cost of these Islamist civilisationalist populists.

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Macbeth* showcases not only a man with a guilty conscious but also an ambitious woman in the form of Lady Macbeth. Wife to a lord of the realm, Lady Macbeth seeks means to increase the family's social and political influence. Upon hearing the prophecy of the Wayward Sisters, she forces her husband to seize the throne. Her persuasion leads Macbeth to a short-lived reign, but it ends tragically for all involved.

While Lady Macbeth is often symbolized as a bad wife and a manipulative embodiment of allegedly feminine vice, she is also a Machiavellian politician. Throughout the play she uses carefully crafted words to evoke Lord Macbeth's emotions and makes tantalizing promises. Her central convictions hinge on greed for power but to convince her husband, she creates a crisis and promises a solution to it. Lady Macbeth is thus very similar to some populists in power today who prey on anger and fear while promising solutions to what ails 'the people.'

In this paper, we aim to discuss not a classic English tragedy but rather the tragic Islamist populist political trajectories of leading politicians in two countries. Turkey and Pakistan are both victims of populism, and we argue that these countries have seen Lady Macbeth manifest in the form of religious populist leaders.

These figures have constantly used populism in the political sphere—and have, in fact, also used politics to enhance their populism. They've maintained their longevity and relevance in politics through constant polarisation and by creating fear and sowing suspicion toward 'the others.' They give 'the people' hope of justice, morality, and change. They've tried to carve out a permanent place for populism in politics.

In recent years, both Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Imran Khan in Pakistan have made headlines for the wrong reasons. Erdogan, the once hopeful Muslim democrat, has turned into a populist authoritarian with hard-line religious ideas challenging the secular democratic constitutional system of Turkey, Turkey's pro-Western posture and alliances (Yilmaz, 2022). Khan has moved from social tabloids to frontline news with his Islamist-populist blend of politics that feeds on the ontological insecurities of Pakistanis. While both leaders operate in quite different contexts, they share striking similarities beyond their shared populist Islamism.

POPULIST CRISES ROOTED IN CIVILISATIONALISM

Populism tends to act as a magnet for various societal ideas and emotions. It can attach itself to a wide spectrum of social and political ideologies, ranging from far left to far right (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Stanley, 2008). Populism's "thinness" (Taguieff, 1995: 32–35) allows for it to attract many perspectives and makes it highly adaptable (De la Torre, 2017; Galito, 2018; Mudde, 2016). Within this quality of mutation, populism attracts issues, themes, and ideas which are 'flash points' or triggering in nature.

Populists can attract mass attention by steering debates on contested issues and, especially, by making emotional appeals to base feelings like fear (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). Both positive and negative emotions are used by populists to shape their ideas and to appeal to the masses. While non-populists also use emotions in politics, what makes populists different is their intensive use of emotions, especially by discursively dividing society into two antagonistic camps where dangerous 'others' have been assaulting the existence of 'the people,' who are always 'pure' and 'right' by default. Populists claim to represent the people and try to rally and mobilise them against 'the other.' Who constitutes 'the people' and who is 'the other' varies by context.

While populism has largely been studied as a Manichean struggle between the virtuous people, the corrupt elite, and dangerous others within national borders, populism's transnational and foreign policy

implications fall under a civilisational rubric that is mostly drawn along religious lines (Brubaker, 2017). In some cases, populist political leaders use right-wing ideas to promote the idea of a civilisation in danger (Gudavarthy, 2021; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). This civilisational populist discourse emphasises the importance of antagonistic civilisational differences in global politics and often explains the world in terms of a Huntingtonian 'clash of civilisations,' positing that 'our' civilisation is threatened by an enemy civilisation or by people from that civilisation who live within 'our' national or transnational/diasporic communities (Brubaker, 2017; Lesch, 2020; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021; Saleem et al. 2022).

Manufacturing 'crises' is central to civilisationalist populism. Crises help create a story of an ideal 'homeland' or 'heartland' which is either lost, dreamed of, or threatened. This is not only limited to a land but extends to way of life, culture, religion and civilisation that can be framed as under existential threat by dangerous others. These then define the parameters of 'the people' and 'the others.' The otherization process then hinges on profiling 'the others' as either threats to the pure people or a hinderance to achieving the promised society that the pure people deserve.

Erdogan and Khan merge Islamist populism with civilisationalism, allowing them to constantly manufacture and instrumentalise civilisationalist 'crises.'

Their use of religion adds a further layer of emotional resonance in their efforts to mobilize the masses. Both leaders have been able to retain relevance in politics by using either real or constructed Islamist civilisationalist populist crises. When a crisis is real, they skilfully manage to frame it as a civilisational populist issue regardless of its real reasons and roots. Thus, a typical devaluation of the country's currency because of economic factors could be explained as an existential civilisational attack against the country by the Christian Western crusaders, imperialists, or the 'interest lobby' (a.k.a. Jews) that despise the people's religion, Islam.

THE CASE OF ERDOGAN

Of the two leaders, Erdogan has been widely studied and acknowledged as a populist politician. His long tenure (over two decades) and Turkey's closeness to Europe has put him on the radar of political scientists for some time (Yilmaz, 2018; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019; Yilmaz, 2021a; Tas, 2022). Erdogan and his political party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), came to power with an anti-establishment and pro-development agenda (Yilmaz, 2009; 2021a; 2012b). While hailing from a long line of Islamist parties banned by the Kemalist state apparatus, the AKP was a reformed Islamist party which posed as Muslim democrat (Yilmaz, 2009). This came with the promise of joining the European Union (EU), democratising Turkish politics (Yilmaz, 2009), and a move to resolve many ethnic-religious rifts left wide open by Kemalist leadership (Yilmaz and Shipoli, 2022). The AKP's first two tenures were dedicated to accomplishing these goals but, due to their complex nature and the party's failure of nuanced skills, this led to opposite results. By the end of 2010, the party found itself losing popular support (Yilmaz, 2021b). Even when the AKP was a democratising force during its first term, these Kemalist bureaucrats tried to maintain their tutelage over elected politicians and vehemently resisted the pro-EU reforms.

In response to this, the AKP supported some judicial trials that were "seen by many domestic and international democratic individuals,



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, Turkey on August 30, 2014. **Photo: Mustafa Kirazli.**

as well as observers, experts, and institutions such as the EU, as a chance to get rid of Turkey's notorious deep-state or, to put it more directly, the Kemalist tutelage led by the military" (Yilmaz, 2021a: 199). However, it turned out that these trials were motivated also by "an undemocratic power struggle within the state, where the AKP and some Gülenists were trying to replace the Kemalists" (Yilmaz, 2021a: 199). During these trials, Erdogan and the AKP used observant Muslim citizens' legitimate grievances against the past undemocratic aggressively secularist practices to frame the Kemalist bureaucracy as 'the enemies' of the predominantly Muslim people.

The AKP used this populist frame to advance a reform package via the 2010 judicial referendum. Under these reforms, the military and judiciary—which were still dominated by the Kemalists—became handpicked by the government. Erdogan called this referendum a “milestone for democracy” and cast it as an issue of the political will of the people versus a power tussle between the AKP and the former Kemalist regime (CNN, 2010). Upon victory, he again framed the whole event as a national crisis—but the nation had ‘won’ and was ‘moving forward,’ as he explained: “Yes, to freedom. Yes, to rule of law. No to the law of the rulers. The tutelage of the coup regime is over” (CNN, 2010).

After consolidating his power as a result of the referendum and especially after winning 50 per cent of the vote in the 2011 election, Erdogan’s and his “AKP’s reformist and democratising agenda became steadily weakened. Erdogan was re-elected as prime minister, but thereafter he began to react to political challenges in an increasingly demagogic and autocratic manner” (Yilmaz, 2021a: 199).

As an example, take the Gezi Park protests—a peaceful grassroots movement initiated against the AKP’s corruption and habit of gentrifying or developing public spaces (Gümrükçü, 2016). The government’s harsh response resulted in police brutality against the peaceful protestors, causing several injuries and fatalities. Erdogan employed his civilisationalist populist framing during these protests and accused the protestors of

being the puppets of imperialists and the interest lobby. To convince their supporters that their values, religion, beliefs and Muslim civilisation were under attack, Erdogan, the AKP and their media spread disinformation, fake stories and anti-Western conspiracy theories. Erdogan labelled the protestors as “deviant youths” and “tramps” who desecrated a mosque and peed on a practicing Muslim woman who sported a headscarf (Geybullayeva, 2022). Thus, in the eyes of his supporters (40-45 percent of the voters), he successfully turned the event into a moral, religious and civilisational crisis for ‘the people,’ and the alleged desecration was an emotionally triggering aspect of this struggle. Nearly a decade after the protests, Erdogan still uses them as means to discredit protests against the AKP’s growing authoritarianism. He mainly does this by showcasing opposition as a threat to social order and disrespectful of the religious sentiments of Muslims, as he said during the ninth anniversary of the event in June 2022: “We are on the ninth anniversary of the events called the Gezi events, which went down in our history as a document of betrayal, shame and vandalism [...] They are corrupt, they are sluts, they know nothing about a holy mosque [...] We know who was behind the Gezi events where public buildings, police vehicles, ambulances, businesses, civilian cars, municipal buses, streets and parks were burned down” (BIA News Desk, 2022).

Over time, the Gulen Movement has become one of the AKP’s most prominent examples of civilisationalist rhetoric. As a former ally, this

faith-based social and educational movement faced souring relations with the AKP. In late 2013, during the dispute, Erdogan and his close allies were being investigated over corruption (Seibert, 2014). Several leaked audio tapes of the AKP's top leadership revealed the party's appetite for corruption and nepotism. The AKP turned this self-created political crisis into a civilisational crisis. It accused the Movement's members of working with Western countries and Israel against Islam and the Muslim world, as specifically represented by Turkey and the AKP. Then, the AKP started "purging" those suspected of being Gülenists from the police and bureaucracy; these "members" were framed as spies, security threats, and even traitors. Erdogan actively framed the Movement as a parallel structure within the state—one which allegedly worked against the country's national interests. This framing justified the government's 'witch hunt' against the Gulen Movement—an action that Erdogan defended by saying, "In order to sterilize this dirty water that contaminated the milk, we will either boil or molecularize it" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2014).

In a 2014 interview, he expressed this idea further. The Gulen Movement was a security threat (Solaker, 2014). Erdogan explained: "These elements [Gulen Movement] which threaten the national security of Turkey cannot be allowed to exist in other countries because what they do to us here, they might do against their host."

The AKP justifies its hard-line approach towards opposition by framing them as threats to the

nation and 'ummah.' This trend has accelerated since 2016, as the AKP has taken a clear turn towards populist authoritarianism. Its core ideology is rooted in Islamist civilisationalism, where Turkey is viewed as a nation under threat from 'enemies' within and outside. Using the trauma of the past and merging it with present insecurities has allowed the AKP to manipulate events in its favour, allowing it to undertake undemocratic practices and frame them as necessary steps to 'save' a country under constant 'threat.'

A failed coup attempt in July 2016 gave Erdogan the power to enforce a Presidential system, grossly violate human rights of his critics, instrumentalise institutions to echo his populism, and stifle political opposition (IAHRAG, 2021). All of this had been made possible by exploiting or stoking anxiety, fear, anger, deprivation, and insecurity. The Gülen Movement has been overtly blamed for the events of 2016. A civil movement has been transformed into a "terrorist organization" via the power of narrative. In a July 2016 interview Erdogan gave with CNN right after the turmoil, he expresses his certainty that Gülen is a terrorist (CNN, 2016).

On another occasion, Erdogan compared the movement with terrorist organisations and armed groups: "Those who follow the Pennsylvania-based charlatan [Gulen] who sold his soul to the devil, or Daesh, which shed Muslim blood, or the PKK that also has shed blood for 30 years to divide the country and the nation, will all lose in the end"

(McKirdy & Alam, 2016). Following the July 2016 ‘attempted coup,’ the Gulen Movement has formally been listed as the “Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO),” and its activities were outlawed, assets were seized and redistributed, and its members and alleged members were arrested. At the first anniversary of the event in 2017, Erdogan publicly promised: “We will rip the heads off of these traitors [Gulen Movement]” (MEE, 2017).

As Turkey’s prospects for EU membership faded, the AKP’s leadership used the growing resentment over this issue—as well as past fear and distrust towards the West—to increasingly portray ‘external enemies’ as responsible for domestic problems. These countries were increasingly portrayed as hosts for “FETOists”—and this wasn’t just an insult to Turkey but a threat to democracy everywhere: “The attitude of many countries and their officials over the coup attempt in Turkey is shameful in the name of democracy” (Karadeniz & Pamuk, 2016).

Over the last decade, Erdogan has been quite willing to exploit Islamophobia to extend his narrative about Western countries antagonizing Muslims. While Islamophobia has undoubtedly increased post-9/11, as a populist Islamist, Erdogan has used its existence to prove the narrative that Western nations are the enemies of the East. He’s done this in a Huntingtonian fashion, openly accusing the West of “playing games with the Islamic world.” (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a; Douglass-Williams, 2019). On many occasions, Erdogan has behaved undiplomatically to

Western counterparts. He has called the Dutch government “fascists” and accused them of “Nazism” when AKP members were refused the opportunity to hold rallies with expat Turks (Marris, 2017). Erdogan has consistently framed the West as lacking empathy for Muslims: “This virus [Islamophobia] is spreading very quickly in countries that have been portrayed as cradles of democracy and freedom for years” (Daily Sabah, 2021).

Moreover, Erdogan has repeatedly blamed “international lobbies” and “foreign powers” for the fall in value of the Turkish Lira’s value (Smith, Sage & Charter, 2018). He called such forces the “global barons of politics and money” who were allegedly derailing Turkey’s progress: “We’ll not give up our new economic program no matter what they do [...] They are trying to create a dark scenario using foreign-exchange levels” (Ant, 2021).

As the 2023 elections near, Erdogan has been busy urging the masses to “continue fighting” and “working” for the country’s “purification” from various threats. He added at an event, “We will not give an opportunity to those who want to strangle us with other traps that our country has repeatedly fallen into. Those whose politics consist of lies are not good for this nation” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2022).

At the same times, promises of hope for deliverance from the various ‘crises’ are also transnational. Erdogan has been highly passionate about the Palestinian cause and has promised

deliverance to the ummah (OpInida, 2020). At the same time, his growing Islamist policies are also justified as a means of elevating the status of the “victimized” ummah. In 2020, at the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, Erdogan’s comments reflected this promised deliverance: “The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footsteps of the will of Muslims across the world to come... the resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the reignition of the fire of hope of Muslims and all oppressed, wrong, downtrodden and exploited” (OpInida, 2020).

What Erdogan thrives on is discord and insecurities that are pre-existing in Turkish society and felt amongst the ummah. The craft of the populist is attaching these vulnerabilities to various populist civilisationalist ideas and instrumentalizing them into ‘crises’ that benefit them. For example, each year on the anniversary of the 2016

coup attempt, the events have been relived and the narrative of looming threats to Turkey is reinforced. Over the years, the list of ‘others’ continues to grow, encapsulating not just national but transnational ‘threats.’ These layers of crises are added to the AKP’s narrative (Carol & Hofheinz, 2022; Yilmaz, 2021a; Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2021A; 2021b; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021). The sense of a looming crisis justifies the AKP’s undemocratic actions and it sows deep divisions within a society shaped, in part, by Islamist civilisationalist populism.



Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan addresses to his supporters during public gathering held on December 11, 2012 in Lodheran, Pakistan.

THE CASE OF KHAN

Imran Khan has also centred his politics around crises which have evolved and intensified over his political career. Like Erdogan, Khan has used pre-existing fissures in society—including anti-West sentiments, Pakistan's ontological crises, and distrust towards the political elite and various state institutions—to create a collage of crises that have kept him at the centre of mainstream politics.

After retiring from international men's cricket, Khan took to politics. In his initial years, very few took Khan seriously; many dismissed him as an idealist (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b). His narratives were focused on human development, which were backed by his history of philanthropic work in Pakistan. He was a beloved celebrity, but it was not until the 2010s when he started gaining political clout. Khan's rise to political prominence is directly linked with the creation of several crises (and supported by military backing) (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022). After almost a decade in the limelight

of Pakistani politics, Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has shown an ability to survive without the backing of the establishment thanks to populist-created crises. Since April 2022, relations between the party and establishment have soured, resulting in Khan's ouster from office (Basit, 2022). Khan has relied on major crises to remain relevant in politics and has even challenged the longstanding hegemony of the establishment (Alvi & Khan, 2022).

It's useful to look at the evolution and various forms of these political and social crises. Khan gained political prominence for opposing the West's "War on Terror," in the early 2000s—a stance widely broadcast on Western media. Khan was critical of Pakistan's alliance with the US (Khan, 2021), and he led anti-drone attack rallies in the affected areas of Western Pakistan. Khan's characterisation has been clear throughout: he primarily portrays the West as untrustworthy, exploitative, and self-serving which

results in exploitation of Muslims, including Pakistanis (Afzal, 2018; BBC, 2012). This misplaced sympathy with the Taliban earned Khan the title of ‘Taliban Khan’ in the international press. Khan declared the Taliban “holy warriors” and found merit in their cause (Butt, 2021; Boone, 2012). It was this sentiment that led Khan to call the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, in 2021, an attempt to dismantle Western influence in the region by “breaking the chains of slavery” (Muzaffar, 2021). But his narratives only gained widespread attention in Pakistan when the military establishment was out of power and needed a civil partner to counter mainstream political parties (Siddiqi, 2022; Basit, 2022).

In early 2010s, Khan rose to prominence due to his direct attacks on corrupt mainstream political parties. Khan’s narrative was that of ‘tabdeli’ (change) which he compared to a “tsunami” bringing much needed change to Pakistani politics (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b). Khan rose to prominence during a politically precarious time: the same dynastic-led political parties were winning elections despite a range of corruption charges blemishing their records. Khan and the PTI offered a much-needed alternative. Between 2013 and 2018 (from the PTI winning its first majority in a province to winning a nationwide majority in the 2018 general elections), Khan created a populist-styled political crisis. In this crisis, ‘the people’ were being robbed of their communal wealth and right to be heard by “looters” (mainstream politicians). Khan explained the “dire” situation in the following way:

“When one party was kicked out on charges of corruption, the second took over and they made the rounds of corruption [...] people were forced to choose one among these two as they had no other choice” (Zafar & Karni, 2018).

Voters found themselves with a choice to avert this political crisis by choosing the PTI over “rats,” “mafia,” and “traitors” (terms used by Khan to label political opposition) (Khan, 2022; NDTV, 2022; Sharma, 2022). This crisis was not imaginary: the Bhutto-Zardari and Sharif families had been implicated in several corruption cases (The New York Times, 2020; Khan, 2018). When the Panama Papers leak contained the names of several of these political families, it gave Khan legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Khaleeli, 2016). Khan promised populist reforms to end corruption in less than 100 days, direct citizen communication with the government, social welfare for all, and improved economic performance (PTI, 2018). In 2011, before PTI’s first major victory, Khan promised deliverance for the “wronged people”: “Once we are in power, we’ll end corruption in 90 days. My party has zero tolerance for corruption and corrupt people” (Mansoor, 2011).

The promises kept getting flashier, such as in 2012, with Khan promising, “PTI will come to power along with policies to address all problems.” He even said his government would only need 19 days to end corruption and 90 days to end terrorism (The Express Tribune, 2012). While in office following the 2013 general elections, the PTI found itself

in charge of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. After this victory, Khan told Pakistanis to “wait and see” the elevated status of the province by the end of his term (Ilyas, 2013). However, the party’s performance in the province to improve public facilities, eradicate terrorism, and end corruption remained unfulfilled. In direct contradiction of his electoral promises, Khan forged a comfortable alliance with the ‘corrupt’ and ultra-right Jamaat-e-Islami (Samaa, 2017; Shams, 2016; Dawn, 2013; Khan, 2014).

With the 2018 elections approaching, and PTI suffering from a problematic performance in KP, the party launched its 2018 election campaign by stoking layered crises and with a pronounced religious connotation. The core crisis of corruption was now linked with the moral degradation of society. Khan blamed the latter on Pakistanis turning their backs on Islam. He promised to end corruption and all other problems faced by country by following a model of Riyasat e Medina (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). In Khan’s words: “Over the last 75 years of Pakistan’s history, our country has suffered from elite capture, where powerful and crooked politicians, cartels and mafias have become accustomed to being above the law in order to protect their privileges gained through a corrupt system” (Khan, 2022).

He presented the Riyasat e Medina model as a solution to the multifaceted problems facing Pakistan: “In Islamic civilization, the manifestation of our spiritual principles happened in the Prophet’s (SAW) Madina. Besides many other

important principles, there were five very important guiding principles upon which the state of Madina was built. These principles are unity, justice and rule of law leading to meritocracy, a strong moral and ethical foundation, inclusion of all humans in progress and prosperity, and finally, the quest for knowledge” (Khan, 2022).

By 2018, the crisis was not only political but spiritual. Khan mainstreamed the idea that the Muslim ummah (and especially in Pakistan) had been “left behind” due to their waywardness from Islamic governance and social morality. The following abstract from an interview showcases Khan’s framing of the crises in populist Islamist fashion:

“At the moment, the worst advertisement[s] for Islam are the Muslim countries with their selective Islam, especially where the religion is used to deprive people of their rights. In fact, a society that obeys the fundamentals of Islam must be a liberal one. If our Westernized class started to study Islam, not only would it be able to help our society fight sectarianism and extremism, but it will also make them realize what a progressive religion Islam is. They will also be able to help the Western world by articulating Islamic concepts” (MEMRI, 2011).

Such rhetoric combined with constant narratives of corruption and the support of the establishment, landed PTI in power. However, soon after taking office, the party found itself taking ‘U-turns’ on many fronts (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021c). From going to the International Monetary

Fund (IMF) for a bailout package to relying on “electable” candidates to the win the 2018 elections, Khan and PTI repeatedly contradicted their promises. Things were made worse thanks to growing economic pressures on the already fragile economy during and after the global Coronavirus pandemic.

Amidst all these problems, the Riyasat e Medina model was thickened. Despite being highly dependent on Western financial institutions and aid, Khan continued to promise to be independent from the West. His pre-election speeches before 2018 showcased the layers of crisis narrative he’d constructed, including Pakistan’s “slavery to the West” enabled by the corrupt elite leadership. He promised a foreign policy free of US influence, no IMF packages and the promise of a Riyasat-e-Medina (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Even though Khan went to the IMF—despite promising that Pakistan would no longer take the “begging bowl” to the West—he maintained his anti-Western rhetoric (The Indian Express, 2019). He constantly blamed the US for spreading terrorism in Pakistan and the socio-economic ramifications of the ‘War on Terror.’ At one forum he irritably said: “From this platform, I want them all to know, the country that suffered the most, apart from Afghanistan, was Pakistan when we joined the US War on Terror after 9/11” (USNews, 2021).

The second, more prominent layer of this “Western induced” crisis that emerged during the early phase of Khan’s tenure was the moral dimension of “Western influence.” To

explain away rising child abuse and assault against women, Khan chose to blame the “porn culture” which in his view was “imported” from the West (Tariq, 2021; Images, 2020). The idea of a moral panic is rooted in the misgiving of the Pakistani nation towards the West and Western culture. Khan capitalised on these sentiments by bringing them to the heart of political debates. He explained his convictions in an interview: “In the 1980s our economy was better than [that of] India and Bangladesh, but slowly they left us behind. And it happened because our moralities waned, and this decline started from the elites of our society. [...] I always advise my youth to study the life of our Holy Prophet (PBUH) and understand how he ruled the Arab world. [...] In your life, you will always have to choose between two paths. There will be a tougher path, which appears difficult, and the other will be the shortcut, which everyone else will opt for” (Samaa, 2021).

This construction of a moral crisis aided Khan and was used to explain a lot of domestic issues and their ad-hoc solutions. For instance, when Pakistani women marched on the streets to express their anger over the state’s inability to protect them, Khan dismissed them as “misguided” or “Western influenced” (Images, 2020).

This crisis was linked with the ‘intentions’ of the West and non-Muslim countries. Khan and the military (when working in unison) mainstreamed the idea of Pakistan facing “fifth generation warfare.” According to Khan, the PTI, and the

establishment, Pakistan is being attacked by an “unseen” enemy via an information war. From accusation against India to accusations about the “Jewish lobby,” the information war became a major source of anxiety and concern about “outside threats,” which were blamed for issues ranging from running “misinformation campaigns” and “sponsoring” terrorists in Pakistan (Dawn, 2020). The military’s top brass endorsed this narrative.

To pass on this “credible” information, the PTI and military media, Inter-Services Public Relation (ISPR), collaborated for the promotion of “truth.” This ranged from importing content from Muslim countries such as Turkey and televising pan-Islamist shows, to sponsoring content developers to showcase a ‘positive’ Pakistan (MMNews, 2021). At one such event, Khan urged young people to not rely on Hollywood for inspiration and focus on creating “original content.” He said: “I have seen the inception of Pakistan’s film industry [...] we started copying Indian films after some years. [...]” He continued to push for the need of “original content” which he explained as: “If we want to project a soft image of Pakistan, then we need to promote [the country’s true identity]” (The News, 2021).

Another PTI intervention meant to tackle the moral crisis was to curb Western influence from universities by ensuring Islamist (Islamic) studies are taught at all levels of tertiary education and to introduce a mandatory course on the life of the Prophet (Hoodbhoy, 2021). In Khan’s words, he regrets Western influences and wants to counter them with such measures:

“The English-medium [system of private British-inspired or run schools] evolved in such a way that there was less emphasis on education and more emphasis on creating ‘desi vilayati’ (local foreigners). The attitudes and mental slavery of another culture were absorbed” (Abbas, 2021). He further linked abuse and disrespect of women to perpetuation of Western morals, which could be countered by rooting moral society in the right life of Prophet Muhammad: “When I was growing up, nobody could have thought that acts like this would happen [in Pakistan]. I have been to the entire world; the respect for women I saw while growing up existed in Muslim countries but not in the West. A big reason for the destruction we’re seeing is that our children are not being brought up properly.”

This moral crisis became a permanent fixture of Khan’s interviews and debates. By 2021, Khan ensured that a department was created from scratch called the National Rahmatul-lil-Alameen Wa Khatam an-Nabiyyin Authority (Dawn, 2021a). This government institution is tasked with morally revamping Pakistan’s youth, and it has encouraged higher education institutes to research the “harmful effects” of the West on Pakistan and to study the life of Prophet Mohammad (The Friday Times, 2021).

In addition to using different crises to gain support at home, Khan, like Erdogan, has presented himself as the ‘saviour’ of the ummah. His selection of the ‘cases’ he chooses to showcase is telling of his sincerity with

the ummah (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a). While he considers the genocide of Uighurs in China, also Muslims, an “internal matter” of China, Khan is proactive in calling out Israel’s occupation of Palestine, the global wave of Islamophobia, and issues like Kashmir (Kugelman, 2021). When Shia Hazaras were gunned down during a sectarian killing in Quetta, Khan delayed visiting the community and even called the grieving protestors “blackmailers” who were simply demanding justice for their killed kin (Hashim, 2021; Naya Daur, 2021). Thus, his advocacy for Muslims has always been selective and fed the narrative of civilizationalist populist crises. Islamophobia’s presence, especially in the post-9/11 environment, is undeniable. However, Khan has used the existence of oppression of or discrimination against Muslims to craft a collective identity of victimhood. He has positioned himself as the advocate of these Muslims (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a).

In a firebrand speech in 2022, he proclaimed Muslim leaders’ lack of interest disappointing, as he positioned himself as the voice of the ummah: “This Islamophobia kept growing and the reason was—I am sorry to say—we the Muslim countries did not do anything to check this wrong narrative. How can any religion have anything to do with terrorism? How was Islam equated with terrorism? And once that happens, how does a man in the Western country differentiate between a moderate Muslim and a radical Muslim? How can he differentiate? Hence this man walks into a mosque and shoots everyone

[New Zealand’s Christchurch shooting]. [...] Unfortunately, what should have been done, but wasn’t...the heads of Muslim countries should have taken a stand on this. But a lot of heads of states said that they were moderates” (NDTV, 2022a).

This statement was linked to the development that Khan-led delegations ensured the United Nations General Assembly approved the resolution to assign March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia (Aljazeera, 2022). Following this decision, Khan congratulated the ummah: “Today, the UN has finally recognised the grave challenge confronting the world: Islamophobia, respect for religious symbols and practices, and curtailing systematic hate speech and discrimination against Muslims. The next challenge is to ensure implementation of this landmark resolution” (Aljazeera, 2022).

Khan’s anti-Western rhetoric and civilisationalist crises peaked in April 2022. After a turbulent three years in office, with a vote of no confidence, the National Assembly forced Khan out of office. This event took place after Khan had been head-on with the establishment over the selection of the new head of Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Ali, 2021). Gradually, by April 2022, the PTI’s relations with the establishment had soured, the joint opposition had gained momentum, and the party’s performance was being questioned by many due to skyrocketing inflation. As Khan’s grip on power was loosening, he used the biggest crisis

of all to stay in office. While it did not help him stay in office, it has ensured that he remains a relevant political force in the country. His narratives ensured PTI's comfortable victory in the Punjab by elections of 2022 (Latif, 2022).

In April 2022, when all attempts to revoke his disqualification failed, Khan took to hosting online, in person, and televised transmissions. In each of these highly watched and attended gatherings and recordings, he parroted a similar story. He argued that the vote of non-confidence was a "sazish" (conspiracy) against Pakistan by a "foreign country" (Iwanek, 2022). In the initial period, Khan talked about the existence of a letter sent to the foreign office and claimed that due to his "noncompromising" attitude, the foreign powers wanted him out and allied with the opposition to get rid of him. This crisis was turned into a national security issue and a question of people's "self-respect" and right to "self-determination" (Bol News, 2022; The Indian Express, 2022). Khan used the ideas of honour, nationalism, and even an Islamist clash of civilisations to build this narrative. While blaming the US for the vote of no confidence, Khan told people: "I am telling my nation today that this is our status. We are a nation of 220 million and another country—and they are not giving any reason—[is issuing threats]" (NDTV, 2022b). He stirred anger, betrayal, and anxiety in his audiences. Just as he had mobilised the masses in 2013 and 2018, Khan continued to use crises to gain massive support (ABC News, 2022).

The ongoing crisis in Pakistan combines the previous ones. It links the untrusty West with the corrupt Pakistani politicians in a conspiracy against the 'will of the people.' It is a manifestation of the 'threats' that Khan has been talking about for years—threats to both the country and Islam. The US has been named as the country trying to "interfere" with domestic politics (Baloch, 2022). Using Islamism, Khan labelled the opposition as Mir Jafars and Mir Sadiqs (both men aided the British in annexing parts of India by betraying their Sultan/Nawab). At one of his recent rallies, he lashed out: "Everyone will remember how you devastated the country through foreign conspiracy. Who were Mir Jafar and Mir Sadiq? These were the people who made their countrymen slaves of the British."

He added: "I am here today because [...] we got a message from another country. For a free country, a message like this is [not only] against its prime minister but is also against the country [itself]." He linked the "corrupt parties" with this alleged conspiracy: "...they [the opposition] parties had links with them." He continued: "The most disturbing thing is that they [foreign forces] have links with the people through whom the conspiracy [the vote of no confidence] happened. They are stooges, and stooges means loyal slaves."

These narratives have been a key to Khan remaining in popular favour despite questionable performance since 2013. Using pre-existing flashpoints and discontent,

he's drawn many Pakistanis to his online and offline appearances. This mammoth support is due to the civilisational 'threat' faced by Pakistan and has enabled Khan to question the military, which is seen as a traditional defender of the country. Since April 2022, he has actively blamed the military for not supporting him and remaining "neutral" as foreign countries act against Pakistan's welfare (The Express Tribune, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Much like Lady Macbeth, Erdogan and Khan have used the power of narrative mixed with emotions to shape their countries' political trajectories in their favour. Erdogan and Khan, while operating independently, share hallmark characteristics of Islamist populist civilisationalism. Both abuse historic, political, and economic rifts in society to emotionally charge the masses; they do this by either manufacturing a civilisationalist crisis or framing an existing crisis in a civilisational populist style. Both populists rely on anti-Western conspiracy theories and dangerous sentiments of hate, anger, moral panic, anxiety, injustice, victimhood, and disappointment to highlight various aspects of their crises. Their manufactured crises are not entirely doom and gloom, as they offer hope and resolution in the form of the populists and their parties as the leaders, saviours and protectors of the ummah against 'the Crusader West' that is 'hostile' to Islam and Muslims.

As the cases demonstrate, both leaders take pride in tackling the problems. However, their tackling of 'the problems' is quite selective and superficial. Thus, the crises create an illusion that the populists will deliver a better tomorrow or guarantee justice to the wronged. In reality, they are widening society's insecurities and

divisions. Erdogan in the last twenty years has divided Turkish society on religious and political lines, which is as oppressive as the Kemalist reconstruction of a secular society. Khan has capitalized on pre-existing Sunni majority conservatism and distrust of non-Muslim countries. This has earned him political victories, but the social fabric of Pakistan—always volatile and discriminatory towards the marginalized—is as fractured as ever. Today, people in Pakistan have lost trust in the state's key institutions, and a segment feels at ease contributing all negative things to 'Western conspiracies.' We find that these populists are not original creators of these crises but opportunistic users. Crises—real or imagined and manufactured—are instrumentalized for political purposes. This enables these populists to blur the lines between fiction and reality, as they try to turn situations in their favour.

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ADRESS: 155 WETSTRAAT / RUE DE LA LOI 1040 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

EMAIL: ECPS@POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG

PHONE: +32 24658318

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