

## Is Populism Paralysing Pakistan?

Rizwan Shehzad

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When Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf came to power in 2018, many in the country felt nothing but happiness. The World Cup winner's support base expected he would revamp the entire governance system and stamp out corruption for good in just 90 days. The country, they believed, would progress to such an extent under his rule that people from abroad would seek jobs in Pakistan rather than the usual other way around.

In the three-and-a-half years that followed, the ousted prime minister frequently reassured the nation: "Aap ne ghabrana nahin hai," (don't be afraid) become his and his party's oft-repeated refrain as they promised the nation that better times were just around the corner. But despite the optimism that Imran Khan and PTI tried to espouse, their failure to deliver on their vague and ambitious campaign promises left their government confronted with more questions than answers. The high hopes attached with PTI government ultimately curdled into political chaos and economic failure, and people began to wonder if country was really going into the right direction amid sky-rocketing inflation, widespread unemployment and poverty, the highest-ever prices of petroleum prices and devaluation in rupee's value against dollars among other challenges.

As the scene changed last month after a no-confidence saga chock full of twists and counter-twists, and a new cast took centre-stage, there was some hope that 'seasoned hands' would at least try to arrest some of PTI's ill-advised economic measures. Very soon, however, it became depressingly apparent that they too found themselves paralysed before the wave of populism they had sought to use against Imran Khan's regime.

Although the opposition-built narrative succeeded in pulling many PTI lawmakers and allies to the Pakistan Democratic Movement camp and within days, those sitting on the opposition benches moved to the treasury benches, the former ruling party drummed up massive support by portraying its ouster as a foreign-backed regime change operation. Announcing en masse resignations, the PTI has since taken to the street and started demanding fresh elections.

Despite the change in government, Pakistan's immediate problems have remained where they are and the overall crisis has in fact gotten worse. Imran's successor Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his ministers have had to rush to London to take guidance from their party supremo – Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz's own populist mastermind Nawaz Sharif – and sought support from government's allies. Despite getting word of advice from the party head and unequivocal support from the allies, the Premier Shehbaz has not yet been able to take the tough economic

decisions as serious differences have emerged between the coalition government and the powerful stakeholders on the tenure of the government; leaving everything once again in limbo, except populism.

### **Misplaced political priorities**

The only thing that has flourished in Pakistan's recent past and over the years is populism or populist narratives; a phenomenon that has increased manifold just like country's political, economic and constitutional crisis with no practical and permanent solution in sight, at least for now. From former premier Nawaz Sharif to his daughter Maryam Nawaz and from ex-PM Imran Khan to present Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto, all have been thriving on the wave of populism and wish to form the next government preferably with two-thirds majority – a dream of political parties vying for power. The leadership of the parties like JUI-F and MQM-P and many others with a small number of seats in parliament but more support from masses, also rely on street power and populist sentiments as they too, like others, care more about the appeal of their political narrative over focusing on generating policies that can generate steady growth.

For the last four years, it was not only the populist narrative that bloomed but the impasse between PTI and all other political parties was based on Imran Khan's decision to not sit with the opposition parties on the pretext that they were "corrupt". Shaking hands with them would send the wrong message to his voters and supporters that he was now compromising with those he was campaigning against all along. The party's political narrative was given preference over national interests and all opportunities where consensus could be developed were simply wasted. The reason: no need to sit with opponents as it would damage the populist narrative; that was something PTI believed it could not afford.

The climax of this outlook was apparent when the PTI government showed its willingness to sit with banned outfits like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan – which is not ready to lay down arms, and accept the constitution and democracy – but refrained itself from engaging the then opposition parties for meaningful dialogue. It, however, occasionally tried to take some cosmetic measures when the second tier of the PTI leadership was tasked to engage the then opposition parties. Ironically, the move suggested that sitting with the "corrupt" leadership was legitimate for some but illegitimate for Imran Khan himself – just because voters and supporters would raise questions on the party's populist narrative.

The situation is not different on the other side as the then opposition, which has now come into power, is also resorting to using the kind of language that the other side used for it for last few years. One can argue that the use of foul language has become a worrying hallmark of Pakistani politics for a long time, but no one would deny that the kind of language being used in public gatherings these days is simply unprecedented. Still, it appears no one cares because they believe this is what sells to their prospective voters. Both sides are now openly calling each other corrupt, looters, traitors, and do not hesitate to pass below-the-belt remarks, among other things, as they feel that is what their voters and supporters want to listen to and that if they feed them with something else then they might lose the battle of populist narrative.

### **Populism and its perils**

Tom G Palmer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and director of Cato University, says in one of his articles that historians and political scientists have argued for decades about what exactly populism is, and they have not always come to the same conclusions. The senior fellow of Cato Institute – a public policy research organisation or think tank that creates a presence for and promotes libertarian ideas in policy debates – says that the political theorist Isaiah Berlin had warned in 1967 that “a single formula to cover all populisms everywhere will not be very helpful. The more embracing the formula, the less descriptive. The more richly descriptive the formula, the more it will exclude.”

Nonetheless, Palmer adds, Berlin identified a core populist idea: the notion that an authentic “true people” have been “damaged by an elite, whether economic, political, or racial, some kind of secret or open enemy.” The exact nature of that enemy—“foreign or native, ethnic or social”—doesn’t matter, Berlin adds, saying what fuels populist politics is that concept of the people battling the elite.

The president of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) Ahmed Bilal Mehboob said that populism, to put it simply, is seeking popularity by short-term actions while sacrificing long-term gains. In this context, the PILDAT president said, it is difficult to find political leaders in democracies who don’t resort to populism. “The nature of the three-to-five year election cycle promotes a quest for short term gains in general but some countries and some leaders face this populism trap in the extreme,” Mehboob said, “Pakistan may possibly be counted among those countries.”

It is the quality of leadership and the awareness among people that determines the extent of populism and its success in a society, Mehboob argued, saying that great leaders like Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher do rise above the compulsions of populism and take the right decision. “Even Gandhi rose above populism and took unpopular designs like fasting for releasing assets of Pakistan in the custody of Indian government after partition,” he said.

Political analyst Zaigham Khan while commenting on how much populism and narrow party interests were hurting Pakistan, said that “populism is doing immense damage to Pakistan’s democracy, economy and society as is the case with each country where this brand of politics has become a major influence.” Agreeing that populism promises instant solutions to complex problems, Zaigham, who is an anthropologist and development professional, said that the “populist leaders thrive on narratives that present simple solutions to complex problems.” Often, he said, they end up worsening the situation. For example, Zaigham said, Imran Khan reduced every problem to the problem of corruption and presented himself as the solution. Though corruption is a serious problem, he argued, it is not the most serious one and not the only one.

Giving another example, Zaigham said that Bangladesh is far more corrupt than Pakistan but is making exemplary economic and social progress. Ironically, he said, Pakistan’s economy suffered under the PTI and the country became more corrupt under Khan if we go by the Transparency International’s Index. Zaigham said that “there is hardly any doubt that Imran Khan is a populist leader with strong authoritarian tendencies,” saying “he [Imran] has undermined the parliament, judiciary and executive, and has mismanaged the economy.” Imran has also deeply divided Pakistan and promoted a culture of hate and intolerance, Zaigham said,

adding the current government is unable to solve the problems he left because of the way he is threatening it and undermining its legitimacy.

### **Anti-elitist and anti-plurarist**

In his pieces, Palmer while refereeing to 2016's "What Is Populism" of the Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Müller proposes another characteristic: "In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always anti-pluralist". "Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people." In that formulation, Müller says, the key to understanding populism is that "the people" does not include all the people. It excludes "the enemies of the people," who may be specified in various ways: foreigners, the press, minorities, financiers, the "1 percent," or others seen as not being "us." Palmer says that the Berlin-Müller brand of populism that is currently surging in Ankara, Budapest, and Washington, threatening individual liberty, free markets, the rule of law, constitutionalism, the free press, and liberal democracy.

"Populists frequently believe that the true will of the authentic people is focused in one leader," Palmer writes. The Cato's senior fellow says that Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's late populist president, put it bluntly: "Chávez is no longer me! Chávez is a people! Chávez—we are millions. You are also Chávez! Venezuelan woman, you are also Chávez! Young Venezuelan, you are Chávez! Venezuelan child, you are Chávez! Venezuelan soldier, you are Chávez! Fisherman, farmer, peasant, merchant! Because Chávez is not me. Chávez is a people!" To further substantiate, Palmer says, Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, once responded to a lone opposition voice by thundering, "We are the people! Who are you?" And then, he says, there's former U.S president Donald Trump's less dramatic declaration that "I am your voice!"

Professor Dr Faizullah Jan, the chairperson of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of Peshawar, said that the populist leaders simplify the most complicated issues and try to present things in black and white. For instance, the professor in communication from the American University at Washington DC said, ex-PM Imran Khan presented the idea that corruption would be eradicated if an honest man was at the top and on the basis of it he had claimed that corruption would be eradicated from Pakistan within the first 90 days of his rule starting from 2018. Everyone knows the end result: Pakistan further slide down the corruption list during his rule. Imran, however, successfully declared himself an honest leader on the way, he said.

Professor Jan, who is the author of *The Muslim Extremist Discourse: Constructing Us versus Them* (2015), said that Imran Khan may not be a money-chaser but his lust for power is evident before everyone. Another slogan of a populist leader is that he makes people believe that he was here for the people and doing everything for them, the professor said, adding Imran can't say that he is not interested in power as he is the power contender. Besides, he argued, money start coming to you in other shapes, like gifts, even when you are not doing corruption but hold powerful position.

Elaborating further, Professor Jan said that the populist leader uses his charisma and, though he believes he is saying the right thing, gives false hope to people. When the promises are not fulfilled, he said, disillusionment is created against the democratic system that it couldn't deliver.

Giving example of former U.S president Donald Trump, the professor quoted American politician and author J.D. Vance: “Trump is cultural heroin. He makes some feel better for a bit. But he cannot fix what ails them, and one day they'll realize it.” Professor Jan said that populist leaders take people into a trance but they won't solve their problems, adding that people are unable to critically evaluate merit in the presence of the populist leaders.

### **‘Democratic doesn’t always mean liberal’**

Palmer maintains that populists may seek power by democratic means, but that does not make them liberal. “They often campaign against limits on the power of the people, especially independent judiciaries and other checks on the executive,” he adds. Populists can be socialist or nationalist or both, he continues, they can be “pro-business” (crony capitalist) or “pro-labor” (crony unionist), but they share the idea that society must be put under some sort of control, exercised by a leader or a party that represents the true people and is fighting against their enemies.

Palmer builds his argument further by referring to Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau, the author of *On Populist Reason* (2005). For Laclau, Palmer says, a populist movement is a collection of otherwise unrelated unmet “demands” aggregated by manipulative populist leaders. The demands are all different, but they are unified in a movement that constitutes “the people.” The designation of “the enemy of the people” is a strategic matter, a means of assembling a coalition powerful enough to be united under a leader for the purpose of seizing state power.

The final and most toxic ingredient is “affective investment”— that is, emotional engagement. “What unites the otherwise disparate and inchoate demands,” Laclau says, “is the group’s adoration of the leader and hatred of the enemy.” Laclau’s wife, Chantal Mouffe – a Belgian political theorist –describes the choice of target as essential to building the “sort of people we want to build.” “By identifying The Enemy, The People is constructed,” she says.

Another tool that the populist leaders successfully use, Professor Jan said, is discrediting the mainstream media to the extent that people start relying on social media or unverified sources of information instead of consuming the information presented in the mainstream media. “People start living in bubbles and they avoid alternative opinion and, thus, develop narrow perspective,” he said, saying the fault also lies on mainstream media as they keep on inviting and relying on the same people who are everywhere. He said people can’t relate themselves with the people being given space in the mainstream media, especially, when their bias has become an open secret and they become “celebrity journalists or analysts”. The next thing, he said, they try to do is to become kingmakers.

“A populist leader easily takes advantage of the discredited media when the mainstream media stops critically analyzing popular slogans and inviting experts who could build alternative opinion based on reality,” Professor said, saying there was a dire need to make people media-literate so that they can also differentiate between news, blogs, general information on internet, organizational policies etc. “They should be told that everything on internet is not trustworthy,” he said, adding journalists should also make conscious efforts to stay unbiased.

In the current context, PILDAT's Mehboob said, tough and unpopular decisions need to be taken in Pakistan to avert a disastrous economic situation but impending election and an unforgiving opposition make it very difficult to take such decisions. Current government, when in opposition, was equally unforgiving towards the previous government, Mehboob maintained, saying "if people are unable to distinguish between short-term relief and long-term pain, chances are that they will end up supporting populist leaders." At present both the competing parties and their leaders are acting as populist ones, he said, adding, as a result, "it is the country and its long term interest that suffers the most."

Commenting on the long-term consequences of populist leaders' slogans, especially, when they make people believe that they are the "last hope", Professor said that people start promoting authoritarianism and become fed up from the democratic system when things do not work as promised. "Populists are dictators in their thinking; they are not democratic," the professor said. Answering how the populists rise, Professor Jan said that the opponent political parties pave the way for the rise of the populist leaders, adding the second thing that contributes to it is the syllabus/curriculum. If you go through the current curriculum, he argued, it constructs an image of Imran Khan disguised in the image of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. "You won't get an image of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan or Bhutto from it," he continued. "The curriculum promotes populism the way populist leader simplifies the problems," Professor Jan said, "the system will continue functioning like the way it is until the curriculum is not changed. "It will continue producing populist leaders," he incorporated.