

## **Pakistan's Growing Political Intolerance**

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Peruvian novelist and 2010 Nobel laureate in literature Mario Vargas Llosa argues that for four decades Venezuela was the most prosperous country with a stable democracy in Latin America. In these forty years, this Venezuelan democracy worked, creating institutions that produced prosperity, and a way of living in which tolerance was extremely important. Coexistence in diversity, which is a great democratic ideal, was a reality in Venezuela. Other Latin American countries wanted to follow Venezuela but before that could happen, Venezuela started suffering a startling collapse.

“What happened? Why did Venezuela, which was progressing, suddenly start to regress and follow the crazy demagoguery of Comandante Hugo Chavez? What happened?” The Nobel laureate asks while discussing the challenges of populism at the Cato Institute in November 2018. “A fiction took control,” Llosa himself answers. Being a fiction writer, Llosa loves persuasive fiction but warns that fictions are extremely dangerous in politics, emphasizing that it should stay in literature.

Llosa states: “In literature, fiction doesn't lie—fictions present themselves as fictions. When you open a novel, you know that this is not the real world—this is the world of literature. But in politics, when fiction presents itself as history, the real history, these lies can seduce societies and produce the kind of catastrophe, the terrible cataclysm, that is Venezuela in our days. With populism, you live in a world of fiction.”

Currently, Pakistan is experiencing the fiction touch. The constitution of Pakistan talks about only one scheme of government and that is democracy. But democracy seems to be in danger as it is being replaced by fiction—populism—which promises to solve Pakistan's problems instantly and without giving any sacrifices. What PTI's Imran Khan promised before the 2018 elections, and what the incumbent PML-N-led ruling alliance promised before ousting him through a no-confidence motion and coming into power has not materialized. The goods times that they said were just around the corner have yet to come. In contrast, people, almost on a daily basis, are hearing about the country being on the verge of default.

Among other challenges, Pakistan is facing sky-rocketing inflation, the highest-ever petroleum prices and devaluation in rupee's value against dollar while the leadership is busy raising hopes of the nation with their populist slogans and narratives. That's what populist leaders and populism do and, surprisingly, people buy it. People imagine that they will progress in no time,

as instant solutions to complex problems are easily introduced into a society, especially the one facing a crisis and looking for a messiah.

Dr Asma ul Husna Faiz, Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), believes that PTI's Imran Khan is an example of a quintessential right-wing nationalist-populist who instrumentalized the discourse of change accompanied with an aggressive anti-corruption crusade to rise to power in 2018. Dr Faiz argues that the three years of PTI in power exhibit a linear pattern of populist rule sans power and performance. In "We Are on the Same Page: The Curious Case Of Imran Khan's Populism In Pakistan", Dr Faiz writes that the early years of Khan's politics neatly fit the profile of a populist with his incessant reliance on an anti-corruption narrative in a quest to challenge the dominance of the two leading parties of Pakistan, PML-N and PPP.

Though almost the entire political leadership of the country is thriving on a wave of populism, rarely anyone made tall claims like Khan—eradicating corruption in the first ninety days after coming into power in 2018 and transforming the country in no time. Khan believed that corruption would be eradicated if an honest man was at the top, but during his rule, Pakistan further slid down the corruption list. Nevertheless, Khan successfully declared himself an honest leader. He is once again promising and making people believe that the solution to every problem, including the worsening economic crisis, is in holding early elections, something that one of his party leaders Fawad Chaudhry recently contradicted in a talk show. Chaudhry said that even if the incumbent government stays in power or PTI comes into power after early polls, no one can fix the economy in just six to eight months

Dr Faiz writes that Khan's populist and authoritarian government came to power riding the wave of an ambitious hundred-day agenda with the promise of the creation of the state of Medina during his tenure. However, she continues, three years into the tenure, the government's performance was abysmal with soaring price hikes, unprecedented foreign borrowing, hostile relations with the opposition, and obsessive reshuffling of bureaucracy. "The absence of performance increased the government's reliance on populist rhetoric, and by default enhanced its dependence on the military establishment," she states.

## **Populism and its kinds**

Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change argue in their report "Populists in Power Around the World" that populism contains two primary claims: a country's "true people" are locked into conflict with outsiders, including establishment elites, and nothing should constrain the will of the true people. Although populism always shares these two essential claims, Kyle and Gultchin maintain that it can take on widely varying forms across contexts, adding that their report identifies three types of populism, distinguished by how populist leaders frame the conflict between the "true people" and the outsiders.

Kyle and Gultchin list cultural populism as the first kind, saying it claims that the true people are the native members of the nation-state, and it tends to emphasize religious traditionalism and sovereignty, among other things. The second one is socio-economic populism, which claims that the true people are honest, hard-working members of the working class, and outsiders can include big business, capital owners and actors perceived as propping up an international capitalist system. The third one is the anti-establishment populism, which paints the true people as hard-working victims of a state run by special interests and outsiders as political elites. Although, they say, all forms of populism rail against political elites, the anti-establishment populism distinguishes itself by focusing on establishment elites as the primary enemy of the people and does not sow as many intra-society divisions.

Nobel laureate Llosa says that populism makes people believe that they cannot prosper because everybody is taking advantage of them; in some societies, populism takes the mask of the left, and in others, the mask of the right. Llosa says that populism sacrifices the future of a country and a society for a very transitory present. “A present that promises to solve all problems.” For Llosa, nationalism is an essential ingredient of populism. He maintains that the kind of nationalism that we have now is a reactionary movement that promises to regress a society to a fictional past that represents a kind of a perfect society. “And there is no country that is totally vaccinated against this kind of fiction,” he adds.

Llosa’s son, Alvaro Vargas Llosa, believes that populism feeds on two really important elements: one is myth, and the other is utopia. Alvaro, a non-fiction writer and journalist, says that myth, of course, is the invention of the past, and utopia is the invention of the future, and it is extremely difficult to fight against both as you can neither disapprove the past nor the future as nobody has seen it. “And if somebody offers you a quicker way to reach utopia, rather than the tough and cumbersome way that rational people like us propose, then clearly, we are at a big disadvantage,” Alvaro says.

### **Is it just about populism?**

PML-N Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed feels that putting everything on populism would not be entirely correct as polarisation is also sprouting from intolerance and a divided polity. “Sharp polarisation, where political differences are personalised, is more an expression of an intolerant mindset in the context of a deeply divided polity. It’s not just about ‘populism’, as we have already experienced this in Pakistan, on state and societal level.”

The PML-N stalwart, who has served as information minister, and is currently Chairman Senate Defence Committee, recalls that in the 1970s, during Zulifkar Ali Bhutto’s rule, the left and right’s hatred for each other—the famous physical brawl between Agha Shorish Kashmiri and Maulana Kausar Niazi in Lahore’s Tollinton Market—is illustrative of that period’s divide. Between 1988-1999, prime ministers and leaders of opposition refused to even look at one another, although they sat three feet apart in parliament.

Senator Sayed says that it is more of a “Punjabi problem”, as the Punjabi political elite is more prone to “political tribalism”, unlike the Pakhtuns who are politically and culturally more tolerant and democratic, rarely personalizing their political differences. For example, he says, in

the polarized Punjab of the 1990s, people loyal to the PML or PPP even avoided marrying into each other's families or attending family functions, something unthinkable in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. He adds: "Another reason is that the Pakistani political elite is, by and large, itself intolerant and undemocratic by temperament and belief. They function mostly in a self-created 'echo chamber' where the 'all is well' and 'we are the best' mantra is preferred and liked. Hence the proclivity to have 'one man show' or a propensity to prefer yes-men, so putting it entirely on 'populism' would be misplaced and not entirely correct.

For Sayed, another myth is that civilian leaders equal democracy and tolerance of dissent and men in khaki equal dictatorship and a closed mind. As the secretary general of the ruling party, during General Pervez Musharraf's tenure, Sayed made a speech in parliament in October 2004, publicly calling "for the release of political prisoners like Asif Ali Zardari, Makhdoom Javed Hashmi and Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani". He adds that Senator S M Zafar, also from the then ruling party, called for General Musharraf to take off his uniform, in 2006. "Zafar sahib was again given a Senate ticket. His vote was not held against him." Ironically, he says, the electronic media revolution is also a product of that military ruler's era.

### **Why is populism problematic?**

Dr Niloufer Siddiqui, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany-State University of New York (SUNY), points out that populism is problematic because it tends to go hand-in-hand with polarisation, and that populists often portray themselves as political outsiders. In the process of doing so, they divide a society into two groups: an 'us' and a 'them.' Dr Siddiqui, a PhD in political science from Yale University, says that polarisation, in turn, works to confirm biases about the outgroup, often resulting in anger and fear of the other, and in some cases, even the perpetuation of violence. "Populist rhetoric justifies acts—even undemocratic or authoritarian ones—by framing them as necessary, or as anti-elite and anti-status quo," she says.

Dr Siddiqui says that research shows that polarized populaces may be less likely to hold their 'side' accountable for undemocratic or violent acts, carrying implications for democratic erosion. Dr Siddiqui adds that polling in Pakistan shows similar partisan divides on how citizens view recent political happenings. In Pakistan and elsewhere, she says, it is not uncommon for such rhetoric to be imbued with misinformation, further perpetuating distrust among segments of society. "Different sides rarely agree on the facts of underlying situations, let alone how to analyse or assess them. This furthers distrust and limits the space available to come together to some agreement."

### **'Messiah' and cult-following**

"Pakistani masses seem to be sandwiched between authoritarian populism and various responses to populism. Political, social and cultural environment is becoming more toxic with the passage of each new day," says Khadim Hussain, who is a columnist, an author and a politician. Responding to a question about populism and growing intolerance in Pakistan, the Awami National Party (ANP) leader says that populism, everywhere, appeals to sentiments and creates

sections of cult-following through arousing feelings of extreme hatred against the ‘other’, using social, economic, and existential insecurities of targeted groups.

During chronic insecurities, the ANP leader argues, people or certain groups of people usually tend to find short-cuts for achieving prompt results suspending their rational and intellectual capacity, at least for some time. “Messiah syndrome is usually galvanised for the abrupt growth, expansion and sustenance of cult-following. The Messiah syndrome conveniently exempts cult followers from applying physical and intellectual energies through persistent struggle.” Hussain says that the ‘messiah’, on the other hand, is pardoned for not working painstakingly to develop a political narrative and socio-political and economic policymaking. He adds that the organizational work of the party to build sustainable structures for a smooth political process is also pushed conveniently under the carpet, creating the hegemony of a selected few.

Without naming anyone, Hussain says that the current authoritarian populist narrative in Pakistan is based on the slogans of ‘conspiracy’, ‘traitor’, ‘national honour’ and ‘freedom’, electrified largely through construction of a digital reality and social media platforms as a post-truth tool. “Public rallies are held for repetitive sloganeering with hatred, otherization and disgust against all types of political opponents to make the effect razor-sharp,” he notes.

Populism, unlike other rationally and intellectually formulated theories, rarely attains a permanent place in the collective consciousness of a society, he argues, saying it is also now common knowledge that a large part of information is disseminated through construction of digital reality reinforced by post-truth international theorization. But he raises the questions as to what populism is and how to respond to populism, which is fast turning into full scale fascism. Hussain feels that populism has recently attained fascist streaks, which have started to systematically target all those groups, classes and state institutions that refuse to be browbeaten to the demands of sloganeering.

### **What is the answer?**

For Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed, more intra-party democracy, less political tribalism, and less dictatorship of leadership in political parties can be the answer to populism and growing intolerance in the country. “Perhaps, less hypocrisy too. Let’s do away with Articles 62/63 of the Constitution, which legally hangs the moral sword of Damocles, coloured by religious piety, over elected representatives.” Sayed makes the suggestion to “discard the Dictatorship of the Leader, which is regrettably part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. In-house dissent should be encouraged, not smothered, only then tolerance will flourish.”

Lest people start pontificating about polarisation in Pakistan, Sayed points out that a recent survey in the world’s oldest democracy, the United States, says that “93 percent of Republicans and 88 percent of Democrats don’t want their children to marry into the opposite party!” A phenomenon Pakistan is familiar with.

Answering the million-dollar question of how to respond to the rising wave of populism and fascism in Pakistan, ANP's Hussain says that the response must be both institutional and political simultaneously and be proactive, consistent, planned, and systematic. He adds that it must not be sporadic and reactionary, at the spur of the moment.

Hussain states: "All state institutions and government departments, including judiciary, Election Commission of Pakistan, National Accountability Bureau, security apparatus and law enforcement agencies, must act strictly in accordance with the constitution and must not surrender their institutional authority under any nebula of pressure." For Hussain, the security establishment must never be lured or pressurized to interfere in politics at any cost: "There must be an end to experimentation with all types of hybrid regimes and manipulation of elections. Let representatives of the people formulate policies and let the civilian executive authority implement the policies."

To Hussain, creating a favourable environment for mutual dialogue and negotiations as well as cooperation for anti-populism and fascism narrative is necessary. "Revenge politics must not pollute the democratic process." Urging that Pakistan needs a socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic paradigm shift, Hussain suggests that "the alternative narrative must be based on parliamentary supremacy, integration from within and without, culture and economy of peace, vision for a social welfare state and federal parliamentary democracy."

Alvaro Vargas Llosa says that the battle of ideas is never won on a permanent basis, and that the world would be very boring if that happened. Listing people as the best allies to defeat populism, Alvaro says that the battle of ideas can be won for a few decades, and in that space right kind of policies can be put in place.

For his father Llosa, the world needs to be prepared to face populism because it suddenly replaces the real world with its fantasies and starts to produce division and demagoguery instead of reason, and fictions instead of truth, even in the most solid societies built on the values of democracy and freedom.