

POPULISM AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This article studies the rapport between populism and political polarization in Pakistan, with special consideration to the period from the late 2000s to 2025. The central argument is that populism in Pakistan is not a temporary electoral style or a simple technique of mass mobilization; rather, it has become a durable mode of political competition that intensifies polarization by dividing society into morally purified camps of "the people" and "the corrupt elite." In Pakistan, this logic has been expressed through anti-dynasty rhetoric, anti-corruption narratives, anti-establishment slogans, religious appeals, digital mobilization, and emotionally charged claims of betrayal and victimhood. The article uses a qualitative, interpretive approach and draws on election data, democracy reports, media assessments, and secondary scholarship to show how populist discourse has restructured competition among parties, transformed public expectations, and placed stress on democratic institutions. The discussion shows that political polarization in Pakistan is not only ideological. It is also affective, institutional, and informational: opponents increasingly view one another as existential threats; state institutions are drawn into partisan struggle; and media ecosystems amplify anger, suspicion, and rumor. The paper claims that while populism has widened participation and given many citizens a new language for expressing exclusion and frustration, it has also undermined democratic restraint when leaders present themselves as the sole authentic voice of the nation. Pakistan therefore offers a revealing case of how populism can deepen representation and democratic aspiration at one moment, yet erode pluralism, trust, and institutional balance at another. The article accomplishes that reducing polarization in Pakistan requires stronger electoral legitimacy, more impartial institutions, healthier party organization, and a media environment that rewards accountability rather than permanent outrage.

1. Introduction

In contemporary politics, populism and polarization have become two of the most discussed ideas in democratic analysis. They do not always appear together, but they often reinforce one another. Populism entitles that society is divided into two morally unequal camps: the pure people and the corrupt elite. Polarization hardens political difference into social distance,

emotional hostility, and institutional conflict. When these two processes meet, politics becomes less about bargaining among rivals and more about moral combat between enemies. Pakistan is a compelling case for studying this relationship because its political system has long combined electoral competition with deep institutional mistrust, uneven democratization, civil-military

tensions, dynastic party structures, media volatility, and recurring crises of legitimacy.

Pakistan's political field has always contained populist elements. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto used a powerful language of popular empowerment against privilege and oligarchy. Religious actors have also used populist rhetoric by presenting themselves as defenders of an authentic moral community against corrupt rulers and foreign influence. In the last decade, however, populism has acquired a particularly intense and digitally amplified form. The rise of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under Imran Khan transformed the grammar of political conflict. Anti-corruption became a moral absolute. Dynastic rivals were framed not simply as mistaken or ineffective, but as fundamentally illegitimate. The establishment was alternately treated as a patriotic partner, a hidden manipulator, or both. Supporters were invited to view politics not as competition among fallible parties, but as a struggle between truth and conspiracy, justice and theft, dignity and humiliation.

This article argues that Pakistan's recent experience demonstrates how populism can deepen political polarization across at least four levels. First, it sharpens affective polarization by turning party identity into moral identity. Second, it widens institutional polarization by dragging courts, election bodies, parliament, and the military into partisan narratives. Third, it intensifies informational polarization through television confrontation, online propaganda, trolling, and selective exposure. Fourth, it encourages constitutional and electoral crises to be interpreted in absolute moral terms, making compromise appear as betrayal. These developments do not stem from one party alone. PTI has been the most visible recent carrier of populist style, but populist language and anti-opponent demonization have also been used by other mainstream and religious actors. Pakistan's polarization is therefore systemic, even if its intensity varies by moment and actor.

The article does not claim that populism is purely destructive. In societies marked by exclusion, elite cartelization, dynastic concentration, corruption, and weak representation, populist appeals often

speak to genuine grievances. They can energize neglected voters, widen participation, and force public debate on concentrated privilege. In Pakistan, this democratic promise mattered. Many citizens, especially younger voters, found in populist language a vocabulary of dignity, accountability, and anti-elite challenge that older party structures had failed to provide. Yet the same language becomes dangerous when a leader claims exclusive ownership of the people's will, casts institutions as legitimate only when they ratify his position, and treats disagreement as proof of corruption or treason.

The main purpose of this paper is therefore analytical rather than partisan. It asks: How has populism contributed to political polarization in Pakistan? Through which mechanisms does this occur? What does the Pakistani case reveal about the relationship between representation, resentment, media, and democratic fragility? To answer these questions, the paper combines conceptual discussion with evidence from Pakistan's political trajectory, especially the period from 2011 onward, when populist mobilization became more centralized, personalized, and digitally mediated. The analysis also takes note of the disputed and highly polarized election cycle of 2024, which intensified debates about legitimacy, party exclusion, and institutional neutrality.

The paper proceeds in eight parts. After defining populism and polarization, it situates these concepts in Pakistan's political history. It then examines the recent populist turn, the role of media and social media, the impact on institutions, and the consequences for governance and democracy. The final sections discuss how Pakistan differs from classic cases of populism and outline conditions under which polarization might be reduced. The broader claim running through the article is simple: Pakistan's crisis is not merely that politics is divided, but that political division is increasingly narrated as a battle over who counts as the nation itself.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Populism is often described as a "thin-centered" ideology because it does not offer a complete social or economic doctrine on its own. Instead, it can attach itself to left-wing, right-wing, nationalist,

religious, reformist, or anti-establishment agendas. What makes it populist is not one policy package, but a specific moral narrative: society is divided between a virtuous people and a self-serving elite, and politics should restore the unmediated will of the people. This definition is useful in the Pakistani context because it helps distinguish populist style from ordinary opposition politics. All parties criticize opponents; populist actors go further by denying the moral legitimacy of opponents as representatives of the people. Political polarization also has more than one form. Ideological polarization refers to the widening distance between policy preferences. Affective polarization refers to emotional hostility between supporters of different camps. Social polarization refers to the embedding of political divisions into everyday social life, including family, friendship, profession, and neighborhood. Institutional polarization occurs when state bodies are perceived less as neutral arbiters and more as weapons in partisan struggle. Pakistan exhibits all four forms, but affective and institutional polarization are especially important. Political opponents are frequently depicted not simply as rivals with different ideas, but as thieves, traitors, puppets, extremists, or enemies of religion and nation. The dispute is therefore not only about what should be done, but about who belongs, who speaks for the people, and who is morally fit to govern.

The literature increasingly shows that populism and polarization often reinforce one another. Populist leaders gain energy by portraying ordinary democratic disagreement as proof that the nation is under siege by corrupt forces. Polarized environments, in turn, make populist claims more persuasive because citizens are already primed to interpret politics through moral camps. This feedback loop can become especially intense in contexts where institutions are distrusted, parties are weakly programmatic, and media ecosystems reward sensational conflict. All three conditions are visible in Pakistan. At the same time, it is important not to confuse all polarization with democratic failure. Some level of polarization is normal in democracy. Elections require alternatives. Citizens often divide over taxation,

religion, federalism, social rights, corruption, or security. A democracy without sharp political difference would not necessarily be healthy; it could simply be unresponsive. The problem begins when polarization becomes toxic. The V-Dem project describes political polarization as a condition in which society hardens into antagonistic "us versus them" camps and political differences begin to shape wider social relationships. At that point, democratic institutions stop functioning as arenas for bargaining among opponents and start operating under the pressure of existential fear. Pakistan's recent trajectory fits this concern disturbingly well. Another conceptual issue is the distinction between populism and patrons Pakistan's parties have long relied on electable, biradari networks, patronage, and local brokerage. Populism does not replace these structures; it sits on top of them. A leader may speak the language of direct representation while still depending on elite intermediaries. This is one reason Pakistan's populism often appears contradictory. Parties denounce dynastic politics while cultivating dynasts; they attack elites while recruiting powerful notables; they denounce corruption while using selective accountability against opponents. These contradictions do not negate populism. They reveal how populist discourse operates within a hybrid political system rather than in an idealized mass democracy. The Pakistani case also requires attention to religion, nationalism, and anti-imperial rhetoric. Populism in Pakistan is rarely only economic. It often draws strength from civilizational language, Islamic symbolism, sovereignty claims, and a promise to restore collective dignity against both internal betrayal and external pressure. This makes populist discourse emotionally potent. It enables leaders to frame policy failure as sabotage, legal accountability as conspiracy, and compromise as surrender. The people are not merely voters; they are imagined as a morally wounded community seeking restoration.

For the purpose of this article, then, populism is treated as a mode of political articulation that moralizes conflict, personalizes representation, and opposes a pure people to corrupt elites.

Political polarization is treated as the deepening of ideological, emotional, social, and institutional division into mutually hostile camps. The core proposition is that in Pakistan, populism has widened participation but has done so through a language and style that intensify antagonism, weaken trust in neutral procedure, and transform democratic conflict into a permanent legitimacy crisis.

3. Research Methodology

This article is a qualitative analytical study based on interpretive reading of primary and secondary material. It uses public election information, democracy and freedom assessments, media reporting, and relevant academic literature to trace the relationship between populist discourse and political polarization in Pakistan. The purpose is explanatory rather than statistical. The article does not claim to measure polarization through a new dataset; instead, it synthesizes existing evidence to show how narratives, institutions, and media practices interact in the Pakistani case.

4. Historical Background: Why Pakistan Was Fertile Ground

Populism did not arrive in Pakistan from nowhere. The country's political history has repeatedly produced openings for anti-elite mobilization. Since independence, the state has faced unresolved tensions between center and province, civilian and military power, constitutionalism and expediency, electoral competition and elite management. These unresolved tensions created a political culture in which claims of betrayal, exclusion, conspiracy, and moral restoration could flourish. The populist precedent most often cited is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. His slogan "roti, kapra aur makan" compressed material deprivation, class anger, and symbolic dignity into a language of people versus privilege. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party mobilized workers, peasants, and lower middle classes against entrenched elites and promised democratic inclusion. Yet Bhutto also demonstrated an enduring paradox of populism: a movement that rises through anti-elite promises may centralize authority once in power. In Pakistan's later history this pattern became familiar. Leaders often claim to embody the people

while weakening institutional autonomy in the name of popular mandate. Military rule also unintentionally strengthened populist tendencies. Repeated interruptions of democratic development prevented parties from becoming fully institutionalized programmatic organizations. Politics therefore remained vulnerable to personalist leadership, charisma, and moralized blame. When democratic channels weaken, citizens frequently place their hopes in exceptional individuals rather than stable institutions. This produces fertile ground for populist narratives in which one redeeming leader stands against a corrupt political class. Another long-term factor is dynastic party organization. The PPP and PML-N have played central roles in Pakistan's democratic story, but they have also been criticized for centralization around family leadership, patronage politics, and insufficient internal democracy. These shortcomings gave anti-status-quo challengers a ready vocabulary. To denounce hereditary leadership, palace politics, and elite privilege was not merely rhetorical invention; it drew on lived frustrations. Populism gains force when it can attach moral claims to recognizable structural grievances.

Pakistan's civil-military imbalance added yet another layer. Because elected governments have often governed under the shadow of unelected centers of power, public accountability has been fragmented. Politicians blame hidden hands; institutions deny interference; voters suspect manipulation but rarely see full transparency. In such a system, populist discourse becomes easy to sustain because politics already feels theatrical, opaque, and conspiratorial. Leaders can plausibly claim that the visible political arena is only a facade and that shadowy elites are blocking the public will. Whether every such claim is true is less important than the fact that the institutional setting makes it believable. Religious mobilization has also shaped the Pakistani field. Islamist parties and movements have long framed politics as a battle between the authentic moral community and corrupt, Westernized, or compromised rulers. Even when they are electorally weak, such actors have expanded the repertoire of moralized politics. Their influence is visible not only in religious party

campaigns but also in the symbolic language adopted by mainstream parties that seek moral legitimacy through Islamic references. Populism in Pakistan therefore cannot be understood purely through class or anti-corruption narratives; it must also be seen through moral identity, communal authenticity, and civilizational insecurity. Media liberalization in the 2000s transformed these tendencies. Private television channels widened political discussion, but they also converted politics into spectacle. Talk shows rewarded confrontation, accusation, moral certainty, and theatrical exposure. Television did not create polarization by itself, but it trained audiences to consume politics as a contest of scandal and humiliation. Social media later accelerated this shift by allowing parties and supporters to bypass gatekeepers, build cultic loyalty, and weaponized grievance in real time. By the time PTI emerged as a national electoral force, the structural ingredients were already in place: distrust in dynastic parties, anger at corruption, fragmented institutions, uneven democracy, media sensationalism, and a public eager for moral clarity. Pakistan was therefore not simply experiencing a global populist wave. It was entering a new phase of a much older crisis in representation, one in which the promise of authentic democracy became fused with deeper habits of personalized and antagonistic politics.

5. The Recent Populist Turn: PTI, Anti-Elite Mobilization, and the Moralization of Politics

Although populist themes existed earlier, the most consequential recent turn came with the rise of Imran Khan and PTI. Khan's political appeal combined celebrity charisma, anti-corruption absolutism, nationalist dignity, welfare language, religious symbolism, and direct communication with urban and young voters. PTI's message did not merely criticize corruption as a policy problem. It presented corruption as the master explanation for national decline and the defining feature of a morally bankrupt elite order represented by established parties. This gave supporters a simple and emotionally satisfying map of politics. One reason the PTI moment mattered so much is that it fused aspiration with resentment. Many citizens, especially middle-class and younger voters, did not

join the movement only because they hated rival parties. They also wanted meritocracy, cleaner government, and a state less captured by patronage and family privilege. PTI's discourse gave them a sense of personal and collective awakening. Supporters were not just party workers; they were citizens reclaiming the country from mafias. This moral elevation is central to populist politics. It turns partisan alignment into ethical self-definition. At the same time, PTI's anti-elite message was never entirely stable. Early in its ascent, the party benefited from alliances with traditional notables and from a political environment in which sections of the establishment were widely believed to be less hostile to it than to its rivals. This created a contradiction: a movement denouncing elite manipulation was also operating within a system shaped by elite brokerage and institutional imbalance. Yet such contradictions rarely destroy populism. They are absorbed through narrative. Tactical compromises are framed as necessary steps in a larger moral struggle. The real intensification came after Khan's removal from office in April 2022. From that point onward, PTI's populism became more oppositional, more emotional, and more persecutory in tone. The movement no longer presented itself only as the challenger to corrupt politicians; it now cast itself as the victim of a coordinated conspiracy involving political rivals and hidden power centers. This expanded the people-versus-elite frame into a people-versus-system frame. Supporters were encouraged to see every legal case, media restriction, or administrative decision through the lens of political theft. Such framing strengthened solidarity but also hardened polarization because it left very little room for procedural legitimacy. The events surrounding May 9, 2023, and the subsequent crackdown deepened this process further. Large numbers of PTI supporters came to believe that not only their leader but their political identity itself had been criminalized. The more the movement was pressured, the more its rhetoric of moral persecution intensified. This is a classic populist dynamic. Repression can weaken organization but strengthen narrative. A movement deprived of ordinary institutional

channels often becomes even more invested in the claim that only it represents the real nation. The run-up to the 2024 general election offered an especially stark example of how populism and polarization can feed one another. According to Freedom House, PTI-affiliated candidates won the largest number of directly elected National Assembly seats, 92, despite what the organization described as multiple measures that hindered the party's ability to compete formally, including restrictions on leadership and electoral participation. Freedom House also noted allegations of rigging, violence, and an election-day internet shutdown. Whether one approaches these developments primarily as evidence of systemic exclusion, flawed administration, or both, their political effect is undeniable: they reinforced the perception among millions of citizens that electoral politics was no longer a neutral process but a battlefield of partisan elimination. Other parties, however, should not be treated as passive objects in this story. PML-N and PPP have also used emotionally charged rhetoric, selective moralism, and personalization. They have portrayed rivals as reckless, dangerous, foreign-influenced, incompetent, or anti-state. Religious parties and movements have sometimes pushed polarization even further by framing politics in terms of faith, blasphemy, and existential moral threat. Pakistan's problem, then, is not one populist actor alone but a competitive environment in which nearly every actor finds incentives to moralize conflict.

Still, PTI's role is distinctive because it normalized a style of politics in which party attachment became fused with total distrust of rival motives and institutions. It made direct digital communication central to mass mobilization. It gave anti-corruption and anti-dynasty rhetoric new emotional intensity. And after 2022, it transformed grievance into a permanent organizing principle. This is why the recent PTI moment should be understood not just as an episode in party competition but as a turning point in the emotional structure of Pakistani politics.

6. Media, Social Media, and the Production of Polarized Publics

No account of Pakistan's polarization is complete without media. Television helped create the culture of permanent political confrontation, but social media made that culture interactive, personalized, and relentless. In earlier phases, audiences consumed political outrage largely as spectators. Today they reproduce it themselves through reposting, meme warfare, trolling, hashtag campaigns, short videos, and influencer networks. Politics has become participatory, but the form of participation is often combative rather than deliberative. Television talk shows in Pakistan have long favored a confrontational format. Anchors often frame discussion through accusation and revelation rather than careful evidence. Politicians interrupt, talk past one another, and perform moral certainty for their audiences. This style trains viewers to think of politics as scandal plus counter-scandal. It rewards speed over reflection and accusation over institutional patience. Such programming does not necessarily radicalize every viewer, but it lowers the status of compromise and raises the appeal of rhetorical aggression. Social media intensified these tendencies for at least five reasons. First, it allowed leaders to bypass party structures and legacy media. Charismatic authority could now be exercised directly. Second, it created echo chambers in which users encountered more content that confirmed their emotional commitments. Third, it blurred the boundary between official party communication and supporter-generated propaganda. Fourth, it accelerated the circulation of rumor and disinformation. Fifth, it turned politics into identity performance. To post politically is often to signal loyalty, courage, belonging, and contempt all at once. Research on Pakistan's digital sphere consistently notes that social media has amplified polarization, especially among politically active youth. This does not mean that technology causes conflict in isolation. Platforms work as amplifiers for existing anxieties, party strategies, and institutional mistrust. But amplification matters. Content that triggers anger, humiliation, or triumph usually travels farther than content that

explains complexity. In highly polarized settings, emotionally intense misinformation can become more influential than formal correction because it confirms what users already suspect. Pakistan's digital politics is especially vulnerable to this pattern because institutional trust is low. When citizens already doubt courts, election management, media independence, and bureaucratic neutrality, they are more likely to believe claims that official narratives are covers for deeper manipulation. In such an environment, every leaked audio, edited clip, arrest video, or voting controversy becomes raw material for identity-confirming storytelling. Even accurate information is interpreted through partisan filters. Facts do not disappear; they are absorbed into rival moral worlds.

The 2024 election cycle illustrates this clearly. Reuters reported that the election occurred in a deeply polarized environment and that delayed results contributed to political turmoil. Freedom House described the polls as marred by rigging allegations, violence, and an election-day internet shutdown. These conditions are important not only as electoral facts but as media events. They shaped public memory through videos, screenshots, partisan commentary, and narratives of theft or stability. Once such narratives harden, elections no longer settle disputes. They reproduce them. There is also a darker side to digital politics in Pakistan: harassment, intimidation, and online vigilantism. Journalists, activists, women politicians, and dissenting citizens often face abuse that is gendered, sectarian, or traitor-centered. This shrinks the space for nuanced speech. People learn that moderation brings little reward, while absolute alignment brings protection from one's own camp. The result is a public sphere that is technically more open but substantively more coercive. The issue is not simply freedom versus censorship. Even where speech remains available, the architecture of attention favors extreme performance. Meanwhile, restrictions and crackdowns can perversely intensify polarization by confirming the persecutory narratives of aggrieved camps. When authorities limit visibility, users often become even more convinced that hidden truth is being suppressed. In this way,

repression and digital populism may feed each other.

Media in Pakistan has therefore become both a mirror and a machine. It reflects existing divides, but it also manufactures and deepens them. It gives citizens voice, but often in forms that reward hostility. It exposes power, but also turns exposure itself into spectacle. This helps explain why polarization in Pakistan is no longer confined to rallies or parliament. It now lives in the hand-held rhythms of everyday life, where political identity is reinforced scroll by scroll.

7. Populism, Institutions, and the Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy

A central danger of populism is that it treats institutions instrumentally. Courts, election commissions, parliaments, and oversight bodies are celebrated when they validate the leader's claim to embody the people and denounced when they do not. In a stable democracy, institutions mediate conflict and preserve procedures even when outcomes disappoint. In a polarized populist environment, however, institutions are asked to do the impossible: they must either prove loyalty to the people as defined by a particular camp or accept being branded corrupt. Pakistan's institutional structure is especially vulnerable because it has never fully resolved the balance between elected authority and unelected power. Civilian governments operate in a field where the military has historically exercised major influence, especially over security, foreign policy, and crucial moments of political transition. Freedom House's 2025 assessment states that the military exerts enormous influence over elections, government formation, and policy, while also intimidating media and constraining civil liberties. Whether one agrees with every detail of that assessment, it captures a widely shared feature of Pakistan's political imagination: formal democracy and hidden power are perceived to coexist. This matters for populism because it enables competing narratives of authenticity and victimhood. Governments can present themselves as restoring order against chaos. Opposition movements can present themselves as the true majority blocked by invisible engineering. Courts become symbols not only of law but of alignment. Election bodies are

no longer viewed mainly as administrators but as agents whose every act is read politically. When this happens, procedural confidence collapses. Losing an election or a court decision does not feel like a temporary democratic setback; it feels like proof that the entire system is rigged. The 2024 election cycle sharpened this institutional crisis. The Election Commission of Pakistan hosted official results documentation and returned-candidate notifications, but public trust in the electoral process was deeply contested. Freedom House reported that PTI-affiliated candidates won the largest number of directly elected seats despite severe obstacles, while Reuters described the vote count as prolonged and politically turbulent in a deeply polarized environment. The significance of such evidence lies not only in seat distribution but in legitimacy. A parliament formed under disputed conditions inherits a burden of mistrust that weakens governance from the start. Parliament itself has suffered from this climate. In healthy democratic systems, parliament is the place where intense disagreement is converted into procedure. In Pakistan, parliament is frequently treated as either a venue for symbolic point-scoring or a temporary instrument for coalition arithmetic. Populist actors often prefer direct appeals to the people over slow legislative negotiation. Yet when parliamentary compromise is framed as elite bargain-making, institutional politics loses moral prestige. That decline feeds a cycle in which the public looks increasingly to leaders, judges, generals, and street mobilization rather than to representative deliberation. The judiciary has faced a similar challenge. Courts in Pakistan have long been drawn into major political conflicts, and this history has made them highly visible but not consistently trusted. In polarized moments, every judicial move is rapidly coded as patriotic, compromised, brave, biased, or engineered. This places enormous pressure on the idea of legal neutrality. Once citizens begin to assume that judgments are fundamentally political, even correct legal reasoning struggles to restore trust. The bureaucracy and police are also affected. In a heavily polarized environment, administrative action is rarely seen as ordinary implementation. Arrests, bans, crowd control,

investigations, and regulatory decisions are interpreted through partisan narratives. This makes state capacity harder to build because civil servants and officers are drawn into legitimacy contests that exceed their formal roles. The state starts to appear selective even when some actions are lawful, because the surrounding political environment has already destroyed the assumption of impartiality. A further consequence is that institutional critique becomes total. Populism can perform a useful democratic function when it exposes elite insulation and calls for accountability. But when every institution is portrayed as valid only if it serves one camp's claim to national authenticity, reform gives way to permanent illegitimizing. Pakistan's current challenge is therefore not merely institutional weakness; it is institutional over-politicization. The more institutions are pulled into populist legitimacy wars, the less capable they become of serving as trusted arbiters. And the less trusted they become, the more persuasive populist narratives appear. This is one of the most dangerous loops in the country's democratic life. A full picture of Pakistan's polarization must also consider actors beyond mainstream parliamentary competition. Religious populism and protest movements have played a major role in normalizing the idea that politics should be fought as a battle between sacred authenticity and corrupt betrayal. Groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have shown how quickly moral claims can be converted into street pressure, emotional mobilization, and demands that no elected government feels fully able to ignore. Even when such actors do not dominate parliament, they influence the wider political environment by raising the cost of moderation. This matters because polarization is not only produced by electoral rivals seeking office. It is also produced by movements that redefine the boundaries of acceptable speech, public morality, and national belonging. In Pakistan, accusations tied to blasphemy, disrespect, foreign influence, or betrayal of religion can close democratic debate almost instantly. Mainstream parties sometimes try to avoid confrontation with these sentiments or selectively borrow from them. The long-term

effect is to push politics toward moral absolutes. Once conflict is coded in sacred rather than civic terms, compromise becomes even harder. Street mobilization has a similar effect. Pakistan has a long tradition of dharna politics, protest encampments, and mass demonstrations. Protest is a legitimate democratic tool, especially when institutions fail. But repeated reliance on extra-parliamentary pressure can weaken faith in routine democratic channels. When parties and movements repeatedly suggest that only pressure outside institutions can produce justice, citizens may come to see parliament, parties, and courts as secondary theaters. In moments of crisis this logic easily merges with populism: the crowd is treated as the truest expression of the people, while formal procedure appears slow, compromised, or fake. The emotional memory of protest also matters. Supporters who participate in rallies, arrests, confrontations, or online campaigns often form stronger collective identities than ordinary party voters. They do not simply support a platform; they feel they have sacrificed for a cause. This makes later moderation difficult. A person who has risked reputation, livelihood, or physical safety for a movement is less willing to accept that politics might end in compromise. Sacrifice intensifies moral commitment. In Pakistan's recent politics, this is visible across several camps, though not equally at all times. Youth political culture deserves special mention. Pakistan's younger citizens entered politics in an era of private television, smartphones, meme culture, and leader-centered online communication. For many of them, traditional party patronage offered little emotional appeal. Populist politics, by contrast, offered clarity, mission, and identity. It told them that the country was being stolen by corrupt families and compromised institutions, and that history required courageous citizens to take it back. This message resonated not only because of rhetoric but because it matched broader experiences of blocked mobility, unemployment, inflation, and disillusionment with inherited politics. Yet the mobilization of youth has produced contradictory democratic effects. On one side, it has widened political interest, encouraged issue-based participation, and

forced established elites to respond to a more demanding electorate. On the other side, it has sometimes fostered a political culture in which fidelity to a leader matters more than tolerance for dissent. Online youth networks can become highly disciplinary. They reward emotional alignment, mock ambivalence, and rapidly label critics as enemies or sell-outs. This is not unique to Pakistan, but the Pakistani context of fragile institutions and permanent political crisis makes the effects more severe. Another source of antagonism lies in the use of accountability discourse. Anti-corruption language is central to populism because it moralizes governance. In Pakistan, where corruption is a real public concern, such language has democratic force. However, when accountability is widely perceived as selective - applied strongly to opponents and weakly to allies - anti-corruption campaigns stop building trust and start deepening cynicism. Citizens may still hate corruption, but they no longer believe that institutions address it fairly. This gap between moral promise and procedural fairness is one of the drivers of polarization.

Finally, the Pakistani case shows that polarization is cumulative. It is not produced by one speech, one leader, or one disputed election. It builds over time through repeated episodes: constitutional crises, media restrictions, selective arrests, court interventions, street protests, incendiary sermons, online harassment, and emotionally charged election cycles. Each episode leaves a residue. Citizens store memories of humiliation and betrayal and retrieve them later when new conflicts emerge. The result is a political environment in which current events are never interpreted in isolation. They are read through layers of unresolved grievance. That is why polarization in Pakistan feels so enduring: it is historical memory organized as present emotion.

8. Consequences for Governance, Democracy, and Social Cohesion

Polarization has costs beyond rhetoric. It shapes how governments govern, how oppositions oppose, and how citizens imagine one another. In Pakistan, these consequences are visible in governance paralysis, constitutional suspicion, shrinking trust, and the social normalization of

political contempt. The first consequence is weakened governability. Governments in polarized settings struggle to produce policy consensus because almost every major decision is interpreted through partisan loyalty. Economic reform, IMF negotiations, judicial appointments, accountability measures, provincial bargaining, and media regulation quickly become symbolic markers of camp identity. Even necessary policy can be rejected simply because it is associated with the wrong side. This does not mean that governments lack formal power; it means that policy execution becomes politically brittle. Every setback is magnified, every compromise is vilified, and every decision is narrated as either national rescue or national betrayal. Second, polarization damages democratic alternation. In principle, democracy assumes that today's loser can become tomorrow's winner through recognized rules. That expectation encourages restraint. But when rivals are considered existentially illegitimate, alternation becomes terrifying. Parties then try not merely to defeat opponents, but to disable them. Selective accountability, coercive regulation, legal overreach, and media exclusion become easier to justify because allowing the opponent back into fair competition appears dangerous. Pakistan has repeatedly approached this threshold. The costs are severe: instead of building a stable expectation of rotation through elections, politics becomes a high-stakes struggle over survival. Third, polarization reduces the legitimacy of compromise. In parliamentary systems, compromise is not weakness; it is how diverse societies are governed. Yet populist rhetoric recodes compromise as collusion. Coalition-making is described not as negotiation among representatives but as backroom theft. This may resonate when coalitions are indeed opportunistic, but the broader effect is corrosive. It teaches citizens to distrust the very practices that make plural democracy workable. Fourth, polarization can produce emotional exhaustion and political cynicism. A society cannot remain indefinitely mobilized at high moral intensity without consequences. Supporters become locked into cycles of hope, betrayal, and rage. Opponents become caricatures. The constant demand to

prove loyalty creates fatigue. Some citizens retreat from politics altogether, concluding that all sides are manipulative. Others become even more radicalized, believing that only extra-institutional action can restore justice. Neither outcome strengthens democracy. Fifth, polarization erodes social cohesion. The V-Dem framework warns that political polarization becomes especially dangerous when it spills beyond political debate and affects broader social relationships. Pakistan increasingly shows this pattern. Family gatherings, workplaces, universities, and online communities often reproduce the hostility of party politics. Citizens do not only disagree; they question one another's intelligence, patriotism, morality, and faith. That kind of distrust is difficult to reverse because it becomes part of everyday identity. Sixth, vulnerable groups often suffer disproportionately. In highly polarized settings, minorities, women, journalists, and dissenters are more likely to be targeted as traitors, moral contaminants, or foreign agents. Political discourse becomes so majoritarian and masculinized that nuanced or rights-based voices are pushed aside. This narrows the democratic public sphere and reduces the possibility of inclusive debate. Seventh, polarization affects the economy indirectly. Investors and ordinary households respond not only to policy but to predictability. When politics appears trapped in endless constitutional and legitimacy conflict, uncertainty rises. Economic hardship then feeds back into political resentment, giving populist blame narratives more fuel. Pakistan's recurring economic fragility therefore cannot be separated from its confrontational political environment.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that depolarization means eliminating conflict. Conflict in Pakistan often reflects real grievances: corruption, unequal access, dynastic concentration, provincial frustration, youth exclusion, and institutional opacity. A purely technocratic call for calm would miss the democratic content of popular anger. The challenge is not to suppress conflict but to re-institutionalize it. Citizens must be able to oppose governments fiercely without imagining that political defeat equals national annihilation. That

requires rules that are trusted, institutions that are less visibly partisan, and leaders willing to accept the moral legitimacy of adversaries. At present, Pakistan has not reached that equilibrium.

9. What Is Distinctive About Pakistan's Case?

Pakistan resembles other polarized democracies in many ways, yet it also differs in important respects. Comparative discussion helps clarify what is specific about the Pakistani case. First, many global cases of populism emerge in consolidated democracies where institutions remain relatively durable even as populist leaders challenge them. Pakistan is different because its institutions are already historically fragile, unevenly autonomous, and shaped by long periods of extra-democratic intervention. This means populism does not attack a settled institutional order from outside; it operates inside a field where institutional legitimacy is already contested. The result is more volatility and less procedural confidence. Second, populism in Pakistan is deeply entangled with hybrid power structures. In classic populist narratives, the corrupt elite is usually imagined as elected politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, financial interests, or cosmopolitan establishments. In Pakistan, the elite is harder to define because visible and invisible power centers overlap. A leader may denounce civilian dynasties while relying on elite brokers. A movement may attack "the system" while appealing to some elements within it. This fluidity makes populist discourse especially adaptive. Enemies can be redefined quickly as alliances change. Third, religion plays a stronger symbolic role than in many Western discussions of populism. Even actors who are not formally religious parties often borrow Islamic language to define moral community, legitimate sacrifice, and frame national humiliation. This does not mean all Pakistani populism is Islamist. It means the sacred and the political are more easily woven together, which raises the emotional stakes of conflict. Fourth, the demographic profile of support matters. Pakistan's youth bulge, urban media consumption, and smartphone penetration have made digital mobilization unusually important. The emotional intensity of leader-centered politics

is amplified by platform culture, where loyalty is constantly performed and rewarded. The online sphere in Pakistan is not just a communication supplement. It is a core terrain where legitimacy is produced, contested, and memorialized. Fifth, Pakistan's federal and ethnolinguistic diversity complicates populism. National parties must speak in a register broad enough to appeal across provinces, classes, and identities, yet local politics remains shaped by biradari, patronage, and regional grievances. Populist discourse therefore alternates between universal claims in the name of the nation and selective local accommodations. This produces a layered politics in which moral absolutism at the national level coexists with transactional flexibility on the ground. Sixth, the line between democratic aspiration and anti-plural majoritarianism is especially unstable. Many citizens embrace populist language because they genuinely want a more responsive democracy. They are tired of elite rotation, selective accountability, corruption, and inherited privilege. In this sense, populism expresses democratic hunger. But because institutions are weak and trust is low, that hunger can easily be redirected into exclusionary claims that only one movement represents the nation. Pakistan's experience shows how thin the line can be between democratic renewal from below and democratic erosion through moral monopolization. A final distinctive feature is the recurrence of crisis. In some countries, polarization spikes during election cycles and then cools. In Pakistan, crisis has become almost permanent. Arrests, court rulings, protests, media crackdowns, security incidents, and coalition disputes keep the political temperature high. Permanent crisis favors populism because it makes exceptional leadership seem necessary and ordinary procedure seem inadequate. It also keeps the public emotionally mobilized, which is useful for leaders but damaging for institutions.

For all these reasons, Pakistan should not be treated as a derivative or secondary case in the comparative literature. It offers a revealing example of populism under conditions of hybrid governance, weak institutional trust, moralized media, and recurrent legitimacy breakdown. The country shows that populism can flourish not only

in wealthy democracies facing backlash, but also in postcolonial states where democracy remains aspirational, uneven, and repeatedly interrupted.

10. Pathways Forward: How Might Pakistan Reduce Toxic Polarization?

Reducing polarization in Pakistan will require more than moral appeals for unity. It will require institutional, electoral, organizational, and communicative change. Because polarization is rooted in real grievances, any durable response must combine democratic inclusion with procedural credibility. The first requirement is electoral legitimacy. Elections cannot heal political division if large segments of the population view them as exclusionary, manipulated, or selectively administered. This does not mean every losing side must be persuaded immediately, which is impossible in any democracy. It means electoral rules must be visibly even-handed, result transmission must be transparent, dispute resolution must be timely, and party competition must not be distorted through selective pre-election disabling. Without these conditions, every election becomes an accelerant for grievance. Second, institutions must become more credible as neutral referees. This is especially difficult in Pakistan because perceptions of hidden influence are deeply rooted. Yet even modest steps matter: transparent appointments, consistent legal standards, publicly reasoned decisions, parliamentary scrutiny, and protection for media and civil society monitoring. Neutrality is not created by proclamation. It is created by repeated practices that citizens can observe. Third, political parties need internal reform. One reason populist leadership becomes so dominant is that parties often fail to function as democratic organizations. Candidate selection, policy formation, leadership transition, and membership participation remain weak or personalized across much of Pakistan's party system. Strengthening internal party democracy would not eliminate populism, but it would reduce the tendency to collapse representation into one personality. Fourth, media incentives must change. Pakistan does not need less political discussion; it needs better formats of political discussion. Television debate built around humiliation and interruption should

not define the public sphere. Digital platforms, meanwhile, need stronger safeguards against coordinated harassment and clearly deceptive political content. Journalistic independence is crucial, but so is journalistic responsibility in an environment where sensationalism can have constitutional consequences. Fifth, civic education matters. Citizens must be encouraged to distinguish between strong opposition and democratic annihilation, between corruption claims and proof, between institutional criticism and institutional destruction. This is not a purely school-based project. Universities, media houses, bar associations, professional bodies, and civil society organizations all have a role in rebuilding a democratic vocabulary that treats adversaries as opponents rather than enemies of the nation. Sixth, provincial inclusion and social fairness are essential. Polarization deepens when citizens believe that politics is an elite drama disconnected from everyday injustice. Youth unemployment, inflation, unequal access, and regional marginalization are not separate from the politics of resentment. They are among its deepest causes. A more responsive and equitable state would not end populist rhetoric, but it would reduce its emotional monopoly over public frustration. Seventh, leaders themselves matter. Institutions are crucial, but language also shapes possibility. When leaders repeatedly use treason-centered, dehumanizing, or apocalyptic language, they normalize a politics from which democratic restraint becomes difficult to recover. Pakistan's parties will continue to disagree fiercely, and they should. But they need to recover the ability to say that a rival may be wrong, harmful, or corrupt without ceasing to belong to the constitutional community.

None of these reforms is easy. They require actors to accept limits even when they have the power to exploit weakness. Yet the alternative is visible already: a democracy in form but a legitimacy war in practice, where every institution is distrusted and every contest is final. Pakistan does not need depoliticization. It needs democratic repoliticization a restoration of conflict within trusted rules rather than conflict against the possibility of rules.

11. Conclusion:

Pakistan's contemporary political life shows with unusual clarity how populism and polarization can become mutually reinforcing. Populism gives citizens a language of moral clarity in the face of elite frustration, corruption, exclusion, and institutional opacity. It can energize the neglected, mobilize the young, and challenge complacent party systems. In that sense, it should not be dismissed merely as demagoguery. It often contains a democratic complaint that established actors have refused to answer. But the Pakistani case also demonstrates the danger of populism once the claim to represent the people becomes exclusive. At that point, rivals are no longer opponents within democracy but enemies of the nation; institutions are legitimate only when they ratify one side's moral narrative; media becomes a battlefield of loyalty; and every election or court decision threatens to open a wider crisis of legitimacy. What begins as democratic energy can then mutate into anti-plural politics. The evidence from Pakistan suggests that polarization in the country is not only ideological. It is affective, institutional, and informational. Citizens increasingly distrust not just rival parties but the procedures meant to manage rivalry. State bodies are drawn into partisan struggle. Public discourse rewards outrage and certainty more than verification and restraint. These trends have been sharpened by the rise of direct digital mobilization, by repeated confrontations among civilian actors and unelected power centers, and by a party system that remains insufficiently institutionalized. The disputed and deeply contentious political environment surrounding the 2024 election crystallized these problems rather than creating them from scratch. It showed how easily an already mistrustful system can slide into a wider argument about who is allowed to compete, who can claim victory, and who truly counts as the people. In such a setting, governance becomes difficult, social trust weakens, and constitutional order is constantly pressured by exceptional narratives. Pakistan's future will therefore depend not on eliminating political passion but on disciplining it democratically. Citizens need channels through which anger can become representation rather

than perpetual illegitimizing. Parties need to compete without presenting one another as civilizational threats. Institutions need to act in ways that are visibly more impartial and transparent. Media needs to recover some capacity for explanation over incitement. None of this will produce harmony, nor should it. Democracy is not harmony. It is structured disagreement under shared rules. Pakistan's challenge is that too many of those rules are doubted, and too much disagreement is narrated as moral war.

For that reason, the study of populism in Pakistan is not a narrow case study. It is a window into a larger problem facing many societies: how to respond to real demands for accountability and dignity without allowing those demands to be monopolized by a politics that destroys pluralism. Pakistan remains a country of powerful democratic desire. Whether that desire can be institutionalized without being weaponized is one of the most important political questions in its present and near future.

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