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## The Articulation of Discourse in Populism: Understanding 21st Century Pakistan

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PRASHANT RASTOGI, JAN 5 2021

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan had historically consisted of multifaceted junctures under the rubric of populism which had found existence in religion and civil-military relations, influencing the political discourse in the country. The architect of an independent Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, popularly revered to as 'Quaid-i-Azam' played a critical role in inaugurating the social contract recognised in the 'Two-Nation theory' as a differential principle between the Hindu and Muslim civilizations, hostile to each other, with a lack of common co-existence values to be shared under the aegis of a unified nation. The two-nation theory made the Islamic ideology central to the existence of Pakistan, making the Quranic teachings and Sunnah important for the ruling dispensation to be legitimised (Majid, 2014). Though himself a non-sectarian practicing Muslim with a staunch belief in justice for all sects of Islam and religions (Awan, 2020), Md. Ali Jinnah's promotion of the two-nation theory led to the division of India into two separate countries, ultimately leading to the first interval in populism as an antagonistic principle in an independent Pakistan.

Historically decisive, populism has manifested itself in the social contract wherein religion and disproportion in society together with fortitude for territorial sovereignty were employed to commence a mission grounded in cultural uniqueness and spiritual nationalism. However, the underpinning of the project was bereft of premeditated programmes and a nourishing essence, leaving behind a country attempting to construct a unifying principle amidst divergences in the society. According to Haqqani (2018), 'the ambiguities that characterised the demand for Pakistan could not persist once the demand was fulfilled with the creation of an independent country'. Wint (1966) described the country as, 'with the separate army, separate flag and a self-contained economic and political system still had to find its place in the world'. A beneficiary of Cold War bloc system with assistance from countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, Pakistan received recognition and acceptability as a sovereign entity eager to participate as a strategic partner in the Cold War bi-polar world order.

With a frivolous political system, a splintered social contract and the demise of former Prime Minister Jinnah, populism attempted to find a unifying principle to achieve facilitation in order to promote the established territorial project termed as Pakistan. The importance of religion in pursuance of a blending principle created condition for the Islamists political parties to expand its influence amongst the ideology of state as well as the foundations of the political system. The socially and religiously conservative Islamist political parties like Jamiat-e-Islami, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) majorly stepped in to support the leader's narrative of a power vacuum, thereby persuading the military and the civilian leaders for a greater role in sustaining Pakistan.

To maintain the 'deep-state' (Awan, 2013) and their influence on governance, the role of the military is an alternate significant feature of populism in Pakistan. The military sturdiness could be attributed to factors such as animosity against the neighbouring countries, link with the ISI, disciplined rank and file, and political instability within the country. These narratives have assisted the several coups against the civilian governments and have permitted the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) to play a role in decision-making at the socio-economic and governance levels. This has severed the prospects of challenging the military establishment and time and again, civilian governments have tried to co-opt the latter in gaining access to the reverberations of populism. Moreover, to perpetuate the state's construction of a national identity (Yusuf & Schoemaker, 2013), several media houses have played a crucial role in

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promoting propaganda and fostering the false populist pretences, the implications of which have agonised the state-society relationship.

With several charismatic and populist leaders like the late Z.A. Bhutto, former PM Nawaz Sharif and the incumbent PM Khan and the counter-populism forces like the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) in the 1970s and Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) 2020, it is important to study the factors behind populism in Pakistan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper intends to understand the influence of populism on Pakistan by considering its three pillars which have been utilised by both populist and counter-populist forces to espouse the crisis of existence and create an antagonistic relationship between the challenger and the challenged- Religion, Military and Media. In process, the paper will utilise constructionist ontology and an interpretive epistemology to describe the features of populism grounded in a framework that could assist in theorising and conceptualising populism in Pakistan. Secondly, the paper will analyse the logic of equivalence and logic of difference between the incumbent Khan regime and the PDM movement based on the post-structural discourse theory (PSTD). Towards the end, the paper will highlight the importance of an empty signifier to promote a paradigm based on hegemonic populist tendencies.

## **Features of Populism manifested in the theoretical framework**

Constituting the realm of politics, populism seeks to interrupt the existing governing structures by bringing into perspective the omissions of either the ruling dispensation or the political system. In process, it intends to disturb the status-quo and promote a more radical set of assurances grounded in revolution or reformation, thereby formulating the grievances in a collective will, notwithstanding, the heterogeneity among people. As Jagers and Walgrave (2007) underline:

Populism always refers to the people and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with the people; it is rooted in anti-elite feelings; and it considers the people as a monolithic group without internal differences except for some very specific categories who are subject to an exclusion strategy. (p. 323)

In many instances, populism seeks to find existence in a unifying principle such as an ideology or a charismatic leader. However, the context remains crucial to understand the populists mustering strategy. It could be built upon socio-economic inequality, the 'losers of globalisation or modernisation thesis' (Betz 1994, Kriesi et.al., 2008), and a vertical down-up axis referring to power, and hierarchical position (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, Dyrberg, 2003, Ostiguy, 2009). According to a few strands of Critical Security Studies, the politics of insecurity and fear-mongering (Wojczewski, 2019) also provides a context in which a populist articulates an existential crisis which plays a major role in representing people as underdogs (Jones, 1999) with a heavily suppressed voice of their own. With representation, the reification of identities corresponding to the context establishes the post-structuralism theory's discursive reproduction wherein the identities are formulated as an act of opposition and the popular collective will.

Hereafter, the populist utilises the power of speech and action to structure a discourse built upon indicators present in the context (Hansen, 2011). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), Muller (2016) have suggested this inherent tendency of creating a binary between the people and the elite to be anti-pluralist. However, they have failed to recognise that populism under the expression of the post-structural discourse theory intends to form an inclusionary framework in which many identities co-exist together despite the differences, thereby promoting the pluralist normative vision of a society (Cleen et al., 2018). The success of the pluralist normative vision depends upon the presence of an unstructured social order which is open to political interventions and dislocation for the populist to utilise (Panizza, 2012).

Despite the occurrence of populist movements throughout the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the case of Pakistan stands distinctively difficult to comprehend as it involves the populist tendencies in both the incumbent regime as well as the opposition. Since the advent of an independent Pakistan, powerful speeches by leaders have led to a consolidation of discourse impinging upon the identity of the elite with the help from 'different media such as electronic, print, and social media (Ekstrom et al., 2018). The present regime of Imran Khan in Pakistan though stimulated the challenge against the incumbent government in 2017 by steering the narrative towards anti-corruption, religiosity (Hassan, 2019), partial independence from the military and incubating sovereignty, the veracity of his regime is grounded in

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the same challengeable structures of governance. According to Milam (2018), Imran Khan's political grace is different from the erstwhile leaders of Pakistan in that he is able to channelise the progressive views in flair communicative style.

However, the opposition emerging from Pakistan Democratic Movement while intends to gain from the unaddressed grievances of the people, has been unable to delineate the structural conditions that had historically constituted the identity of Pakistan. Accommodated into the societal fabric of the country, a general definition of populism is challenging to distinguish without residing in the historical implications which have shaped the context in Pakistan. With populism without lucid characteristics, the origin of it had been multifaceted in countries ranging from Latin America to South Asia. The constructivist and de-essentialising ontology has allowed populism to be receptive to the demands of the leaders in the post-structural discourse theory. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), 'there are no deeper, natural foundations determining how society is organised and structured'. There are combinations of structural positions consisting in one's identity wherein subjectivity is considered to be a structural phenomenon (Hudson 2006, Larson, 2015). The impossibility of a pre-given and self-determining essence (Calkivik, 2017) has led to condescension for 'ontological essentialism and epistemological foundationalism' (Torfing, 1999) to understand populism under PSDT.

To create the theoretical framework, I will be relying upon the post-structural discourse theory with its elementary characteristics like the 'logic of equivalence' and the 'logic of difference'. While the 'logic of equivalence' underlines the processes through which populism is in sync with the incumbent authority and the opposition, the counter-force as the 'logic of difference' helps in establishing the separation between the challenger and the challenged (Jacobs, 2018). Although the two logics would attempt to completely dominate the discursive networks, it wouldn't be right to suggest that one can supersede the influence of the other entirely. Together they function as a discursive network using which the populist deliberately constructs an empty signifier grounded in the exclusionary practices of the incumbent via concepts like nationalism, corruption and the 'conflicting other'. Furthermore, these characteristics will assist in comprehending the role of an 'empty signifier' which the populists use to address the set of grievances of the people, enhancing the structures of antagonism in the society. The empty signifier could also be understood as the predominance of a single unifying principle that acts as a cluster to bind the set of heterogeneous grievances into a coherent whole, permitting the populist to develop its representational ability (Laclau 2005c).

Therefore, the different unfulfilled social demands are utilised by the populist to mobilise against the governing set of institutions, thereby making himself the sole representative of the grievances of the people (Laclau, 2005). To understand the presence of populist tendencies in both the political leadership as well as the countervailing forces in Pakistan, I will attempt to theoretically expand the arguments made by academicians like Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and many others. Instead of aligning closely with one set of demands, I will move further by attributing the logic of equivalence and logic of difference to multiple levels of populist tendencies, thereby making the role of an empty signifier inclusive of various points pertaining to religion, media and civil-military relation. It is here I would like to contribute to the existing literature on populism by adding to the established linkages within the post-structural discourse theory to understand the politics of Pakistan.

## **The Structural Logic of Equivalence and Logic of Difference in Populism**

The several protest movements led by Imran Khan as a challenger to the erstwhile incumbent regime of Sharif since 2013 (Murtaza & Azhar, 2020) against the widely recognised corruption cases (Ullah et al., 2020), appalling economy together with a dysfunctional social contract and the support from the military apparatus for the Tehrik-e-Insaf party shaped the emergence of Imran Khan as the new Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2018. The employment of thin ideology as well as the orotundity of 'Naya Pakistan' assisted Khan's electoral aspirations to incentivise the existing alienation of the people by designing a discourse grounded in the removal of prevailing evils and the promotion of transparent governance. According to Khalid (2020), 'The entire politics of Imran Khan, the current prime minister of Pakistan, has focused on demonising the ruling elite for corruption, lack of transparency, governance reforms, social justice, and moral integrity'. However, to conclude the on-going developments as a permanent transformation for Pakistan would be a denial of history. Former PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the mid-1970s exploited the same grievances to regulate the institutions and political system while exerting influence by employing

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the thin ideology of 'social justice' (Hasan, 2020) in governance.

Since independence, the social contract of Pakistan had been grounded in Islamic credentials, undertaking international as well as domestic Muslim cohesion (Karim, 2020). Although the usage of religion as a unifying principle permitted Khan to gain adhesion amongst the aggrieved, it strengthened the platform through which Islamists parties were able to wield pressure on the incumbent government. According to Prof. Ayesha Jalal (2019), the wielded pressure by the Islamists had its significance in history when:

In a defining moment for Pakistan, the national assembly unanimously passed an amendment to the constitution on September 7, 1974, pronouncing the Ahmadis a minority. Declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims laid the basis for an exclusionary idea of citizenship, undermining the Pakistani nation-state's commitment to equal rights of citizenship. (p 175)

At the outset of the new government, PM Khan attempted to disrupt the influence of the Islamists but the case of Asia Bibi<sup>[1]</sup> underlined the barriers for him to succeed in limiting the scope and significance of the blasphemy laws (Ahmed, 2020) in the country. Another case concerning the anti-Ahmadiyya sentiments (Raja, 2020) gained significance amongst the Islamists upon hearing about the prospects of Atif Mian gaining a position in PM Khan's Economic Advisory Council in 2018. With massive protests undertaken by Islamists on the streets of Pakistan, PM Khan had to succumb to the demands of the anti-Ahmadiyya groups (Haqqani, 2020), thereby exploiting religion for political expedience like his predecessors. During the general elections in 2018, short of the majority seat share to form government (Shah, 2019), PM Khan reached out to anti-Shia hardline groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Ahl-e-Sunna-Wal-Jamaat (ASWJ), signifying his concessions to the Islamists and symbolically permitting violence against Shia community (Baloch & Petersen, 2020). However, utilising the same unifying principle grounded in religion, Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), an inclusive coalition of several opposition political parties emerged as a compelling challenger in 2020, defying the orders of the Khan regime.

While the PDM movement claimed to be inclusive of the existing cleavages in the society, the promotion of Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) as the leader underlines the contradiction between theory and practice of counter-populism in Pakistan. The key instance in which Rehman sought to appeal to the Islamists was when the JUI (F) criticised the acquittal of Asia Bibi (Jaffrelot, 2020) in the controversial blasphemy case in 2018. Therefore, religion should be understood as the prime structural 'logic of equivalence' in promoting sectarianism by both the competing factions whereas the oddity of the PDM movement inclusive of democratic, liberal and conservative forces as the structural 'logic of difference' against the leadership of PM Khan.

Another aspect of the structural 'logic of equivalence' underpins the military apparatus in influencing political affairs of Pakistan. By clandestinely or visibly aligning with the military, successive opposition as well as the incumbent civilian governments have authorised the military to exploit the decision-making process, thereby impinging upon the political affairs. Factors such as alleged corrupt practices, political imprisonment (Shah 2019) and business influence have played a crucial role in undermining the political process by the military apparatus and 'selecting' the leaders (Mehmal, 2020) that has raised suspicions on the fairness of the political process in Pakistan (Behera, 2018). Aligning himself closely with the COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa, PM Khan during the election campaign prearranged an obscure coup against the former PM Shairf by targeting him based on the unaddressed grievances of the people.

Unable to eliminate the prevailing economic misery, the argument of 'Naya Pakistan' has become redundant using which the PDM movement is challenging the legitimacy of the Khan dispensation and its reliance on the COAS. Emerging as a counter-populist force, the PDM movement has manoeuvred the same set of grievances – publicly defying the top leadership of the military apparatus yet not challenging the institution itself. Due to the evolving nature of the PDM movement, an absolute claim about the intentions of the movement is difficult to discern. However, the adherence to the military institutions by both competing factions generate the second structural 'logic of equivalence' and the antagonism towards the highest echelons of power within the military by the PDM movement creates the 'logic of difference'. As S. Sareen (2020) in his recent column for the Print underscores:

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The military's support for his bete noire Imran Khan is simply unacceptable to the Maulana. He simply cannot stand the sight of Imran, who reciprocates the sentiment. Nawaz Sharif too, despite his frequent run-ins with the military, has always been seen as a pro-establishment politician. But now both the Mian and Maulana seem to have burnt their bridges with the current military leadership, and feel they are left with no choice but to direct their attack against the military in order to get rid of the military's minions.

Thirdly, the 'logic of equivalence' manifests itself in the manipulation of media narratives in locating populism as the central tendency within the social contract of Pakistan. Successive leaders have sought to undermine the authority of free media in the country by coercing them to promote state-sponsored propaganda and deliberately creating the distinction between vice versus virtue i.e. us versus them. They have also utilised the power of media to promote themselves on the similar lines as the chief architect of Pakistan Quaid-i-Azam, M.A. Jinnah and the saviours of democracy, highlighting the 'discursive macro strategy' (Wodak, 2002) of discourse via muzzling media's autonomy.

During and after the election campaign in 2018, journalists in Pakistan endorsed PM Khan as the leader of the people and as a protector of press freedom along with the right to dissent. However, the authenticity of such claims has been repudiated by the actions of the current dispensation. According to the DW (2020), 'the current dispensation is not only constraining independent journalists, columnists and writers, it has also put a financial squeeze on media houses by various means'. By curbing the free press and gagging several media houses, PM Khan has created barriers in providing an adequate platform for the PDM movement to organise the grievances of the people at a mass level. Although this distinguishes the PDM from the Khan administration as the third structural 'logic of difference', several political parties as part of the PDM movement had themselves curbed press freedom in the past making them converge in the structural 'logic of equivalence'.

## **The construction of an empty signifier**

The antagonism between the competing populist tendencies has structured an all-encompassing 'empty signifier' which encapsulates the collective will of the people towards the 'logic of equivalence' and the 'logic of difference'. An empty signifier could be understood as a cluster which stimulates the populist articulation of discourse, whether in identifying a crisis as a trigger (Roberts, 2015) or as a construction by the populist (Moffitt, 2015), making communication of ideologies, symbols and ideas crucial in the process of sustaining hegemony over power by conflicting parties (Laclau, 1990). Notwithstanding the binary distinction, the opposing forces in Pakistan have designed a narrative that assumes a conflict between competitive authoritarianism versus democracy, thereby fabricating the elimination of the presence of the two empty signifiers in both populist and counter-populist tendencies. It is here both PM Khan and the PDM movement have positioned themselves as the forerunner of the country's progress and advancement.

Therefore, the structural construction (Canovan, 1999) of the post-structural discourse theory (PTSD) remains true to the case of Pakistan because it attempts to comprehend the multifaceted nature of the discursive constructions reminiscent in the crisis of representation (Moffitt 2016), crisis as construction of failure (Hay, 1995) and identity as difference (de Saussure 1959, Connolly 1991) under the rubric of Pakistan's history, institutions and social contract. As stated by Stavrakis et al., (2018), 'Populism is inconceivable without anti-populism; it is impossible to effectively study without carefully examining the second'.

## **Conclusion**

Populism in Pakistan is governed by the historical and political trajectory that the state undertook in the aftermath of its independence in 1947. It has been readily shaped and reshaped by the structural conditions and the various undercurrents withholding the context. More than an ideology, populism has been utilised by the leaders as a strategy to mobilise people by conditioning the aspirations of the people towards either revolution or reformation via the 'logic of difference'. However, the populist and the counter-populist have grounded the populist strategy in the 'logic of equivalence', thereby allaying the grievances of the people towards a consensual yet uncertain end. Both PM Khan and the PDM movement relied upon ambiguous governance assurances during their respective campaigns and switched to the alleviation of distress to manufacture the crisis as an opportunity, underlying the lack of an

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impermeable ideology of populism.

While the personality based political milieu was rampant till 2018 under the semblance of PM Imran Khan, the massive support for the PDM movement highlights a shift in Pakistan's domestic political affairs. The employment of political expediency over the greater good has led to an indignant and friable situation of the country amongst both the international system of states as well as internally. Although the paper has tried to cover the three aspects that have allowed populism to perpetuate its existence in Pakistan- religion, civil-military relations and the role of media, more research is required concerning the antagonism between the centre-province relations and its impact on populism in the country.

The post-structural discourse theory (PTSD) is supportive in understanding the cause of populism in Pakistan wherein both populist and counter-populist have in mutuality, through discourse articulation and antagonism creation, comforted people about the prospects of fairness and integrity in the country. However, in essence, there have been several contradictions between the actions and the intentions of the successive governments governing Pakistan. Therefore, the populist political discourse is helpful in comprehending the institutions shaping both subjects and objects (Dunne & Smith, 2010) and assists the PTSD theory in creating a framework to understand populism in Pakistan. Together these features make the study on populism and populist tendencies in Pakistan vital to understand the broader outlines of the rising populism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Note

[1] Having uttered derogatory remarks against the Prophet, Asia Bibi, a Christian woman was convicted under the blasphemy laws in 2010. Though acquitted in 2018, PM Imran Khan was criticised by the radical islamists for assistance in her flight from the country.

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