



The Rise Of Populism and the Transformation of Political Culture in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Case Study of Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaaf, 2013-2025.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the rise of populist politics and its impacts on the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2013 to 2025. The study is based on secondary data, which includes research articles, books, institutional reports and newspaper articles. It is guided by two theories: the Theory of Populism, which discusses the division among the people, and Political Communication Theory, which concerns how messages are constructed and delivered to the public by a party or its leaders. The findings show that populism emerged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after 2013 general elections with the rise of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf. Through the use of social media PTI was succeeded to mobilize public by populist narratives, emotional rhetoric and anti-elites attitude, while it also contributed to political polarization in the society. The study also highlights that, political discourses in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were shifted from actual policy making and addressing socio-economic problems to nationalist rhetoric and identity based politics. Populist politics also promoted leader-centric politics, where politics is all around from the personality of Imran Khan and have shift the political loyalty and trust toward Khan rather than democratic institutions. Overall, from 2013 to 2025 the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has dramatically transformed with the rise of Populism.

1. Introduction

From the beginning of this century we have experienced that populism is the symbolical characteristic of the contemporary political world, which appear in almost all form and regions. The particular ideology has transformed the political systems of every state around the world. It refers to a populism that seeks to favor —common people| in response to wealthy elites which allegedly perform corruption. The ideology change political discourse and gain support by highlighting the grievances and resentments of the people (Durrani & Barakzai, 2024). The definition of populism varies from nation to nation, because of their nature of politics which approach to different nations in various forms and seek to explain its role by highlighting local politics and political culture (Urbinati, 2019).

Populism can be describe is a way of politics which create a division between the ordinary people and powerful elites or the current political setup. Populism and democracy are closely related to each other, as they both seek to privilege the wants and

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ambitions of the common individuals (Pasquino, 2008). The ideology strives to fulfill the needs of the ordinary folks against the government influencers and even by attacking the representative democracy (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023). It is an approach which sees that the society is split into two categories or groups where they cannot live with each other, the honest peoples and dishonest which refers to the common people and wealthy leaders or establishment of the time. It state that the government should make policies and work according to the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004).

In the twenty-first century populism is at its pinnacle and we have witnessed a wave of populists. Populist leaders are omnipresent in the world of globalization. They are in power in almost all parts across the globe. They hold power in the most powerful and authoritarian country, the United States; they are in power and such an important regions like Poland, Philippines, as well as Venezuela (Stockemer & Glaeser, 2019).

In Pakistan the legacy of colonialism and continuous authoritarian military reins of government have drawn a deep lines of state of turbulent and agitation in the country and led to the emergence of populist ideas to aware and mobilize the people against the ruling elites (Fiaz & Nawaz, 2023). On November 30, 1967 at Lahore a new political party was emerged, called the Pakistan People's Party. The founder of the party was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who became an influential leader in a very short time. The party fundamental principles and Manifesto express the interest on addressing the basic needs and problems of exploited part of the society (Malik et al., 2025).

Before 2018 general elections Pakistan was at continuous struggle of dealing with poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure and having no access to the basic needs of life such as, food, health, education, gas and clean water. Imran Khan through his own party was able to gather support countrywide through the famous slogan "Naya Pakistan" (Rehman et al., 2022). From 2013 onward PTI achieved to become the administration of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for three consecutive terms, first in 2013, 2018 and 2024. PTI is more than merely a political party; it seek uphold justice and accountability, and to treat every citizens without any sort of discrimination. They want to ensure justice and accessibility of basic needs to every Pakistani. Pakistan is rich with every natural phenomenon and has potential to managed crisis. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf seeks to regain the lost pride by gaining power and lead the country with safe and competent hands (Bano & Abbass, 2024).

1.2 Problem Statement

The ideas of populism in the modern politics gain much importance in the whole world. We can find populists almost in every continent. It has very deep root in Pakistan, from Sheikh Mujib Ur Rahman, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Imran Khan. The idea of populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa rise after 2013 general elections and grabs much attention, as Imran Khan emerged is the most popular among other leaders. Despite of its significance influence in the province of Khyber pakhtunkhwa, there is a lack of a comprehensive study. This study explores the rise of populism and its impacts on political culture and the behavior of the people toward politics after its emergence. The study helps us to understand the tactics and strategies of the populist leader which they used to make their vote bank to gain power and fulfill their agenda.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the key factors that contributed to the rise of populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To explore how populism transformed the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the key factors that contributed to the rise of populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. How did populism transform the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The research mainly focuses on the rise of populist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which affected the voting behavior of the people and changed the political landscape throughout the province. This paper explores that how people influenced by the populist anthems and slogans, which can sometimes guide people in wrong directions. The study is valuable for all the professionals of the field of politics to get better understanding about populism and how it reshape the politics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Debate on Populism

Torre and Mazzoleni (2019) illustrate that, the notion of populism is widely used by political activists, Media persons and scholars. Populism is enormously used as an approach to explain the transformation in the contemporary democratic governments (De la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019).

According to Heinisch et al. (2021) in the present political discourse, populism attracts much attention but still its precise definition yet to be finalized. The populist movements in the 19th century were not much popular as the current tides around the world and relevance of the ideology prompted interest in populism (Heinisch et al., 2021). In the same way Webber (2023) states that, different scholars define populism in their own way, due to its versatility and no fixed definition. The word populism often used for rule of illogical mob which is based on emotional rhetoric rather than rational thoughts (Webber, 2023).

López et al. (2024) argue that, populism can be understood through studying it from the perspective of different disciplines. Every field explains populism in their own style which makes it more complicated to apprehend populism thoroughly. By studying it from different perspective we will be able to understand the meaning of the word populism and its use (Domínguez López et al., 2024).

To illustrate, according to Jan-Werner Müller (2024), while the confusing regarding the universal definition of populism still exists, among the scholars the most precise and widely accepted definition of Populism is presented by Cas Mudde. Mudde (2004) defining Populism says that society contains two types of groups —the “common people” verses “the powerful elites”, which divides the society into two completely antagonistic and homogeneous communities (Mudde, 2004).

According to Rastogi (2021) Populism plays a significant role in organizing a group without mentioning to any differences to make them feel the same. They often target an elites or political group which they feel are against them. High leadership qualities and a single reason or ideology help populism to keep people under the single umbrella (Rastogi, 2021).

2.2 Core Features and Nature of Populism

Canovan (1999) argue that, populism is based on supporting the general will of the people and an idea that the representative should be responsible for providing equal access to citizens in the political process and socio-economic opportunities. Populism emerges in a situation when people feel disconnected from political process and disappointed from leaders. In such conditions, populism try to show itself as only platform that can bring political power back to the people and cashes the opportunity to mobilize the masses by promises for solving real life problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and basic utilities (Canovan, 1999).

Taggart (2000) states that, Populism strive to connect with people through idealistic means. Populist portrays an image of an ideal society where people are considered powerful and unite under the same ideology. Populist says that we lost the ideal society and our identity because of the powerful elites and modernization (Taggart, 2000).

N Karlson, (2023) explain that populism works in three basic methods. First, it mobilize people against the current policies and current establishment, that these policies have no potential to address our resentments and socio-economic problems and the leaders are corrupt, second that seek to create a division among the people living in the society and split the society into two groups the common people and the powerful elites, last but not the least, populist try to transform the traditional political culture into modern politics through forming their government. These type of strategies helps populist leaders to gain significance support from the people (Karlson, 2023).

2.3 Historical Development of Populism

Fuentes (2020) argues that, for the first time the word populism/populist was used in the 1890s in the United States, with the creation of the Populist Party. The party was orchestrated by the Alliance of farmers created in the 1870s. In the presidential elections of the Peoples Party candidate in 1892, James B. Weaver, succeeded with above million votes. The term populist was emerged when members of the party feel difficulty to call himself people party. In 1892, The Boston Globe used the word populism for the first time (Fuentes, 2020).

Stockemer and Glaeser (2019) explain that the advance form of populism is emerged after world war 2nd in different parts of the globe. For example; in Western Europe Pierre Poujade in France, setup the foundation of the movement which was against the central authoritarian government in Paris and to support the small business owners against high taxes. In 1960 the national social movement in Italy became the fourth largest political party by emphasizing on national unity rule of law and minorities rights. Most of the right-wing parties in Europe contain intense populist elements by opposing the wealthy elites. The populism

is not merely limited to Europe as two influential Eurasian countries possess populist politics, such as Putin's Russia and Erdogan's Turkey (Stockemer & Glaeser, 2019).

2.4 Populism in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Ullah (2024) in his study assert that, in Pakistan populism were witnessed twice in the political history, first, ex-prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and second, Imran Khan. Both of them were highly skilled with approaching to ordinary people. They gain support in a spate through populist platform (Ullah, 2024).

However, Durrani and Barakzai, (2024) says that, the populist politics emerged dramatically with the rise of Imran Khan and his party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf into mainstream politics. In 2018 elections, Khan came into power with overwhelming majority and got rid of the political establishment as they felt it was not according to the well of the people. Waging the populist rhetoric, Khan and his party pledged to ensure transparency in the system, make leaders accountable and to benefit the ordinary people and marginalized (Durrani & Barakzai, 2024).

Yaqubi (2024) examine that the present uncertainty between the parties on the problem of how to respond to the causes of rising terrorism, The failure of Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan People Party (PPP), Jamiat-i-Ulamai Islam, and JUI (F) on providing a clear and visible solution to counter terrorism, economic crisis, and energy down flow created a gap for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf to avail the opportunity and dominate the Provincial Politics (Yaqubi, 2024).

Recent studies help to understand populism in Pakistan and how it works in a country. Zia (2025) observe that, in Pakistan populism is the result of various factors, such as priority to an Islamic touch, nationalist rhetoric, and politics of right and wrong. The study highlights that, the essence of populism is to focus more on moral supremacy rather than institutional legitimacy, through which the society was divide into pure people and the corrupt elites in Pakistan, and this is what the core characteristics of Khan's speeches. PTI populist politics indicate poor focus on actual policy making and more focus on stage performance (Zia, 2025).

Faiz (2022) explain that, after 2013 elections Khan's party became the largest political party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where they formed their government. The 2013 general elections were a turning point for Khan's popularity in which he succeeded in the province and emerged as a leader of protests and movements, far better than others (Faiz, 2022).

Khan et al. (2025) assert that, the administration from 2013 to 2018 of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province altered the political landscape of the province. Based on its pledges for rule of law, citizen's empowerment, and accountability, PTI transformed the established political culture. Disappointments from traditional political elites and culture, and craving for a pure democratic regime of the people, make the party more popular. KP became the site of experiment for PTI administrative model, which indicates how leaders can transformed the political order (Khan et al., 2025).

2.5 Research Gap

The previous study shows what populism is and how it emerged over time in the different regions of the world especially in Pakistan. It also mentioned how populism affects democratic Principles of a country. The reviewed study examine how populism spread in Pakistan from Zulfikar ali Bhutto to Imran Khan. However, existing studies explain much about populism and give valuable knowledge regarding the spreading of the ideology of populism in Pakistan, There is less focus on the emergence and development of populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study seek to understand how populism spread in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and how the voting behavior of the people and the political culture changed with the new tactics of populist leader.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The study is based on two theories; the first one is Theory of Populism; which explains how leaders get support by making division between the people and elite groups. According to Laclau (2005), in the contemporary politics populism is mostly dependent on emotional appeals, anti-elite discourses, and promise for a successful revolution which led to split the society into two classes (Laclau, 2005). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the theory helps us to see how PTI consider itself is a voice of normal citizen against corrupt parties. The second theory is known is Political Communication Theory; this theory is about how messages are made, convey and how public see them. McNair (2017) argued that, political communication is a vital tool for populist leader to convince the masses and shape their voting behavior through all form of communication regarding political matters (McNair, 2017). Political leaders by discussing news and socio-economic issues framed their speeches in a way that influenced the people and to secure the attention towards party favor (Norris, 2023). The theory helps us to understand how slogans like Naya Pakistan and other emotional appeals changed how people think and vote.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

According to Creswell (2003), “qualitative research design is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individual or group ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2003).” In the words of Tisdell et al. (2025) qualitative research is used to “understand the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their word and experiences they have in the world” (Tisdell et al., 2025). The study uses qualitative research design with limited quantitative data to find out how populism emerged and changed the political landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This approach is suitable to get the in-depth understanding about the narratives, tactics and slogans of populist leaders through which they influence the behavior of the voters and changed the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

3.2 Close Reading

“Close reading is a method of literary analysis which focuses on specific details of a passage or text to discern some deeper meaning present in it. The meaning derived from the close reading is the reader’s interpretation of the passage or text” (Bucks County Community College, 2019). This study employs a close reading technique to examine the manifesto, speeches, policies and statements of the populist leader to get the in-depth understanding about the idea of populism and its strategies of influencing the political landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

3.3 Textual Analysis

According to McKee (2001) “Textual analysis is a methodology, a way of gathering and analyzing information in academic research” (McKee, 2001). The study uses textual analysis to analyze the data, collect from different authentic sources to understand the narratives, slogans or terminologies they uses in populist politics for securing their objectives.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection is the process of gathering information in an organize way from different sources to address the research questions and to get the valuable outcome. This research uses secondary data from various credible sources to answer the research questions. Sources include newspaper articles, books, institutional reports, and academic researches.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of interpreting and organizing the collected data in a systematic way that makes the data meaningful and comprehensible. The secondary data has been gathered from various sources, such as newspapers, books, academic articles, and other authoritative sources. The data is examined and analyzed to identify the main ideas relevant to the research topic. Thematic analysis is applied: the textual data is examined closely, coded by assigning labels to relevant content, and the related codes are then grouped together to form broader themes. These themes are interpreted through the theoretical framework to explain how the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has transformed with the rise of populism, and also to answer the research questions. The limited quantitative data, such as voter-turnout figures and survey percentages drawn from secondary sources, are presented descriptively to support and contextualize the qualitative findings.

4. Critical Analysis and Interpretive Discussion

4.1 The Rise of Populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

According to Rehman et al. (2022) Pakistan was struggling with many domestic problems like socio-economic problem, political instability, bad public services and infrastructure, lack of access to essentials utilities and unemployment before 2018 general elections. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf under the leadership of Imran Khan was succeeded to mobilize the masses and public opinion and populist banners and emerged victorious in the 2018 general elections. From this historical event PTI challenged the traditional politics significantly by promising of “Naya Pakistan” and providing best opportunities to the people (Rehman et al., 2022).

Nawaz (2025) notes that, over the past years PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced a huge surge in the electoral turnout. Many reasons including, such as political participation of youth, the use of social media for campaign, portraying the party as anti-corruption, transparency, public disappointment from elites and traditional political discourses, and charismatic leadership are considered to understand the party performance from 2013 to 2024 general election (Nawaz, 2025).

Farooq (2013) reporting for express tribune observes that four national assembly seats in Peshawar district recorded 44% increase in turnout compare to 2008 general elections. Similarly, reports say that in 11 PK constituencies the average turnout reached 44.34%, compared with 26.15% in the 2008 general elections. Statistics regarding the increase in political participation

indicates a mass political engagement, mobilization and support for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or Populist politics in KP (Farooq, 2013).

From above data we can conclude that populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emerged due to both structural problem and change in the public opinion about traditional politics. The evidence indicates that PTI avail the opportunity to fill the gap of disappointment among the people due to socio-economic problems and emerged as a largest party in KP. Overall people became more participative and being more responsive to emotional political languages, reformist promises and leader-centric politics.

4.2 Political Culture

According to Almond and Verba (2015) political culture refers to “the patterns of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among the members of a political system” (Almond & Verba, 2015). Pye (1966) further explains that “political culture is a set of belief and attitudes which help people to understand the politics and political processes and also provide the framework through which people engage in political activities”. It does not limited to public attitudes and behavior but also play role in shaping political intuitions, political systems of the state and political landscape within the society (Pye, 1966).

Jackman and Miller (1996) say that different political system across the globe is the result of variation in political culture. He further notes the famous example of Max weber’s analysis of the connection between political cultures (protestant) which led to the rise of capitalism (political system) in Europe. They also refer to Almond and Verba’s important piece of work which explore the relationship among the civic cultures and democracy by studying five societies which led to the emergence of behavior revolution in the field of politics (Jackman & Miller, 1996). Inglehart (1988) argue that the effectiveness of policies and a stable democratic government depends heavily on political culture. Trust on democratic institutions, law enforcement agencies, leadership and public participation in political processes can result to stability and development (Inglehart, 1988).

The concept of political culture is mainly centered and focuses on people beliefs, attitudes and perception about politics as well as its role in shaping the political pillars of the state. Political culture can vary across societies and can evolve gradually with time. In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the framework is important to understand how political culture transformed with the rise of populism. The analysis is based on many dimensions which are affected from the rise of populist politics in KP. These dimensions include Political Participation, anti-elites and anti-status quo attitudes, leader-centric politics, the role of social media, trust in democratic institutions, political languages and discourses, and political polarization.

4.3 Political Participation

According to Dawn (2013), after 2013 general election and the Rise of Populist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the political participation and awareness are highly increased. The electoral data indicate high political engagement in democratic processes by showing hype in voter turnout and voter registration (dawn, 2013).

This growth in political involvement can also be seen through data provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan.

Table 1: Registered Voters in 2013 & 2008

PROVINCE / AREA	Voters 2013	Voters 2008
KP	12,266,157	10,661,212
FATA	1,738,313	1,280,365
Federal Capital	625,964	482,801
Punjab	49,259,334	44,500,257
Sindh	18,963,375	19,506,473
Balochistan	3,336,659	4,365,274
TOTAL:	86,189,802	80,796,382

Source, by (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013a).

According to the data provided by election Commission of Pakistan political participation is increased in 2013 general election compare to 2008 general elections. The numbers of registered voter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa increased from 10,661,212 to 12,266,157 in 2013. After 18th amendment FATA was also merged with KP through which register voters increase from 1,280,365 in 2008 to 1,738,313 in 2013.

Table 2: Polled Votes in 2013 & 2008

PROVINCE / AREA	Polled Votes 2013	Polled Votes 2008
KP	5,476,001	3,576,523
FATA	508,013	397,593
Federal Capital	389,976	241,531
Punjab	28,760,265	21,442,088
Sindh	9,782,599	8,612,336
Balochistan	1,300,628	1,367,001
TOTAL:	46,217,482	35,637,072

Source, by (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013b).

The number of polled voter also increased simultaneously. In KP total polled vote was reported 5,476,001 in 2013 which is much higher than 3,576,523 in the 2008 general elections. In FATA the number of polled vote also surged to 508,013 from 397,593 which indicate increase in political participation in Khyber.

According to Farooq (2013) the analysis of the election statistics from various constituencies shows that, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa political participation is increased significantly. According Farooq (2013), the voter turnout for the national assembly in 2008 general election was 28.7% which is increased to 44% in 2013, nearly two time of the previous result (Farooq, 2013).

Gallup Pakistan (2017) further state that from the last 25 years the voter participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa increased from 32% to 42% until 2013 general elections. In Hazara region turnout was recorded 50%, while in Peshawar its 44%. Regions includes in this area are Peshawar, Abbottabad, Mansehra, Hangu, and swabi. The lowest participation in electoral processes was observed 42% at south KP (Gallup pakistan, 2017).

The above data indicate that, with the rise of populist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province observed increase in political participation, voter turnout, registration and political engagement. From last 25 years the numbers of polled vote and registration was increased up to 15% in many areas until 2013 general elections. The findings prove the core assumption of the Theory of populism, which emphasize on the ability of populist leader to mobilize people through direct communication.

4.4 Anti-Elites and Anti-status quo Attitudes

According to Zahoor (2024), in the initial phases of the party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf from 1997 to 2002, the party stance was against the status-quo. However, they were not clear either to support or to stand against the military regime of General Parvez Musharraf. Although publically they used anti-dynastic and anti-traditional political discourses to gain significant support, their policies were not supporting their claims (Zahoor, 2024).

Shakil and Yilmaz (2021) note that PTI in their emerging stages was highly against the powerful elites of both military and civil institutions as they strongly stand against the decision made by the military establishment to interfere in US-led War on terror (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Batool and Faroqui (2024) also point out that populist politics in Pakistan portray a negative image of political elites by saying that they are corrupt economically, use public resources for self-benefit and do not take care of the people. This led to split a society into two forces the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”, while also highlight the grievances between the people and the establishment (Batool & Faroqui, 2024).

According to Pakistan Today (2024) the spokesperson of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, while talking about changing the political system says that, the elites which have violated and exploited the resources of the state will face accountability. The spokesperson further states that the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa trust on Imran Khan leadership as they elected the party to power for the 3rd consecutive time and resist the corrupt elites (Pakistan Today, 2024).

Yaqubi (2024) notes that PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa gain immense support by leveraged the party to bring changes and will create economic opportunities for youth. They frequently challenges the traditional parties like ANP and PPP and promised for sheer change and cleansing of the corrupt elites within 90 days. Internal disputes and traditional campaigning methods of other parties create an opportunity for the PTI to introduce populist politics and gain significant support (Yaqubi, 2024).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa anti-elites and anti-status quo discourses are the main features of populist politics, although it was not implemented and sometimes even contradictory. Evidence indicates that while PTI positioned itself as a challenge to corrupt elites and traditional politics, their policies and engagement were the output of the existing network. By presenting the elites corrupt and disconnected from people reflects theory of populism, which is about creating division between the ordinary people and elite groups.

4.5 Leader-Centric Politics

Khan (2025) points out that from the creation of Pakistan for the first time in the political history Imran Khan emerged as a revolutionary leader, receiving unbreakable support from the people due to its emotional appeals. He (Imran Khan) was succeeded to portray the oppositions as corrupt and responsible for economic crisis in the country by using its populist strategies. His political messages include emotional appeals, economic reforms, structural changes and strong leadership persona (Khan, 2025).

News Desk (2025) states that, the internal political landscape of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa further indicates leader-centric politics. The party leadership continuously made it clear that they are united and will work under the leadership of Imran Khan; they always make decision and portray it with Imran Khan Vision. Key party figures state that Imran Khan is the backbone and the foundation of PTI and all the party members are loyal to the party and to the leader. In spite of internal conflicts and disagreement, the party still maintains its unity through devotion to a single leader (News Desk, 2025).

Staff Report (2024) explains that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Imran Khan was considered a symbol of unification of the people, enjoying a widespread popularity and support throughout the province. The spokesperson of the party state that, the loyalty and unbreakable support for Imran Khan indicates the party identity is strongly tied with a single leader (Staff Report, 2024).

The Daily Times (2025) present a perspective, different and involve criticism toward the leader-centric politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It states that people in the province of KP following a single leader instead of democratic institutions or party base decision making. It further criticizes the authority of the single person to make decision dependent and limited, which is totally against the spirit of democracy and democratic processes (Daily Times, 2025).

The data reflects that, Imran Khan through the use of emotional discourses and the promise of “Naya Pakistan” ignite immense support and loyalty toward himself, rather than the party. While it strengthens cohesion between the party members, it also transforms the political culture toward personalization, where policies and decision was all stick around an individual. The findings reflect the core assumption of the Theory of Populism, which emphasize on the role of populist leader, who represent himself as a true representative of the people against the elites.

4.6 Role of Social Media

Shabir and Haidar (2023) say that, Through Social media common people specifically marginalized groups question and challenge the political leaders. With the emergence of digital platforms the traditional way of communication and interaction between the people and politician changed drastically. Parties depend on Facebook and Twitter for political campaigns and mass mobilization (Shabbir & Haider, 2023).

According to Ahmad (2025) Social media plays an important role for populist leaders. Through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok and other, populist bypass the traditional media like television and newspaper which work as a gate or a third party between people and leader. PTI before 2018 general elections uses social media actively and wisely to construct its populist narratives and gain significant support as much as possible (R. Ahmad, 2025).

Ullah et al. (2024) stated that, in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, social media platforms play a serious role in making public opinion and youth socialization. According to their study, social media becomes an influential tool in both rural and urban areas for political participation, Socialization and engagement. Age group of young people are the most active group in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, they used it for social interaction as well as political participation (Ullah et al., 2024).

According to the analysis of Khan et al. (2021) based on student's data of higher education institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, social media became a platform for discussing political events, and it has provided a forum through which ordinary citizens particularly the youth are involved. The study further explores that traditional political culture and engagement are transformed drastically with increasing use of social media. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the role of digital platforms are unavoidable as it is closely associated to political socialization in the province (Khan et al., 2021).

The rise of social media in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa transformed the traditional political culture after 2013, as it allowed populist leaders to bypass the traditional media and connect directly with the people. It reflects the core assumption of the Political Communication Theory, which emphasize on the role of how messages are constructed, disseminated, and received by people.

Social media platforms like whatsapp, facebook, and twitter play a significant role in political socialization and mobilization among the youth.

4.7 Trust on Democratic Institutions

According to Gallup Pakistan (2025) the emergence of populism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf since 2013, first depend on its populist rhetoric and pledges for structural changes and promise to restore trust on democracy. However, they did not fulfill the expectation of the people. The face to face survey by Gallup Pakistan with 3000 respondents in 2025 shows how dissatisfied the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In survey, 53% were satisfied from judiciary, while 70% complaining for excessive delays in processes, 50% it was corrupt. The satisfaction level from anti-corruption body was just 46% and almost 70% suggested need for improvement and accountability. Only 49% people were satisfied from assemblies while 66% said MPA's are not keeping their promises (Gallup Pakistan, 2025).

Another survey by Transparency International Pakistan in (2025) indicates high disappointment of the people from democratic institutions. According to the data in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 24% of the people considered police department is the most corrupt and 18% are the judiciary and other departments which hold tenders and contracts. About 55% of the people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa believe that the provincial institutions and organizations are more corrupt than the local ones. The data further shows that 77% of the people are not satisfied from PTI performance to control corruption (The Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2025).

According to Shah and Shafiq (2025) Populism has a very tense relation with state institution in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Populist politics by PTI contributed well in mobilizing support for the party, while they have clashes with state pillars, this make institutions more political which reduces the system of check and balance. This resulted into the loss of trust on democratic institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and poor governance increased public perceptions about corruption and inefficiency (Shah & Shafiq, 2025).

The rise of populist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa helped PTI to gain support by the use of anti-elites narratives, it has also reduce trust on democratic institutions. The above evidences suggest that people expectations were not meet by PTI, which led to create mistrust on provincial institutions, such as judiciary, assembly and anti-corruption bodies and elected representatives.

4.8 Political Languages and Discourses

According to Ghauri et al. (2023) in contemporary democratic states leaders deliberately uses emotional speeches to make their credibility and earn support instead of expressing their point of view. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PTI uses political discourses to win the elections, not just through their ideology. They make deeper connection with people and which is not done by traditional parties (Ghauri et al., 2023).

According to Khan et al. (2025) Imran Khan populist and nationalist rhetoric stressed on economic reforms and corruption free Pakistan. His speeches frequently base on logic and persuasive styles to explain complex ideas with reformist strategies. The slogan of "Naya Pakistan" and "Corruption free government" boost his popularity among middle classes and young people (I. A. Khan et al., 2025).

Batool (2025) argues that Through the use of political discourses, Imran Khan constructed himself as a legitimized and competent leader, while the oppositions are corrupt and disloyal to the people. These strategies awake the people to resist and fight with powerful elites as it is a moral duty. This shift in traditional political culture led to the polarization of the society (Batool, 2025).

Zaman and Mushtaq (2023) state that, strategic political discourses greatly contributed to shape the political behavior of the people and acquire notable support in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They heavily stressed on public grievances, anti-elite narratives, youth, marginalized groups, and minorities. PTI through their rallies in high risk areas and strong pledges of changing the political system reinforced their ideas and messages (Zaman & Mushtaq, 2023).

According to Dawn (2022) amid rallies in Peshawar, Imran Khan blamed the political parties PPP and PMLN for selfish political actors. This rhetoric helped the party portray their image as servant of the common people, and present citizens are able to find and resist the conspiracies against the province or the State (Dawn, 2022).

Political languages and discourses played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and political behavior in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. PTI through political discourses framed the party as honest and competent, while portrayed the opposition as corrupt and self-serving actors. The finding aligns with Political Communication theory, which heavily emphasize on the role of constructing messages and discourses which shape the voting behavior of the people.

4.9 Political Polarization

According to Amir (2013) rigid political stances and populist politics contributed to polarize the society of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Amir, 2013). In the words of Ahmad (2025) the use of digital platform “X”, to convey party narratives led to political instability and political polarization in Pakistan significantly. PTI users particularly youth, use social media to wage the counter messages against the state media and institutions, while political rivals use the same platforms to build narrative s against PTI. This turned social media to an open place for discussion and a battle field for different tales. Furthermore, the party members spread fake news against the opponents for the purpose of defamation, which fueled into deep split in the society (I. Ahmad, 2025).

Khan et al. (2023) states that, political polarization in Pakistan is not only the result of social media but also the traditional media. Digital platforms work on specific algorithms, which show the content, the user mostly consumed. This trapped the people in the chamber where everyone see their party as honest and other as a traitor. Social platforms often show biased content which fueled the mistrust on state institutions and antagonism among parties (Khan et al., 2023).

Salih et al. (2025) emphasize that, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced digital political culture after the dominance of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf through its reformist and anti-elites narratives. Due its activeness on social media youth of KP considered PTI as a legitimate and honest party due its messages against traditional parties. However, it also contributed to the spread of misinformation on digital platforms. The consumption of party oriented content on social media makes the division more strong and intensifies due to the algorithm of digital communication technologies (Salih et al., 2025).

The data highlight that political polarization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa intensified after the rise PTI. Various factors, such as populist rhetoric, use of digital tools, and anti-establishments narratives fueled to social division in the province. The data is aligning with Political communication theory, which emphasize on the role of communication channels and shaping political perceptions of the people.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the study shows that with the emergence of populist politics, the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa transformed significantly. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf rise as a dominant and Populist Party in 2013, due to structural problems, socio-economic crisis and grievances form traditional parties.

From the theory of populism perspective, the findings clearly show the PTI anti-elites narratives construct political division between the people. PTI framed their messaged against the traditional elites as a dishonest and self-serving, while consider itself as an honest and supporting the general will. This separate the people into two groups the pure people and the corrupt elites.

The study further elaborates the role of strategic communication of PTI, in their political journey. The finding shows relevance to political communication theory on how populism was waged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The political messages such as, slogans, emotional appeals, nation base narratives, repetitive ideas like “Naya Pakistan” and anti-establishment rhetoric was conveyed strategically to shape the political perception of the people and to gain support.

One of the notable outcomes in the transformation of political culture is increase in political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The shift was driven by change in political discourses and strategic political communication. However, it also constructs the political personalization and identity base politics, rather than practical policy oriented.

Social media played a central role in spreading populist messages and narratives. It provided the platform for political discussion and debates particularly for youths of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Digital means facilitate the leaders to connect directly with citizens and bypass the traditional media. While it also contributed to the disseminating of fake information which further divide the society.

The study further indicated that, the emergence of populist politics with Imran Khan, the political landscape in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shift from institutional to leader-centered politics. Where, Khan’s personality is considered the central point for PTI and its supporters.

The findings further indicate that, due to the strategic communication and emotional rhetoric PTI was succeeded to mobilize the supporter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It also contributed to increase political polarization in the society. This deep ideological division resulted long term challenges to democratic institutions and stability.

In a nutshell, the change in the political culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in not merely because of changing the political discourses but also how the strategic communication was created, how it was disseminated and how it was understood by common citizens. By applying both theory of populism and political communication theory, it becomes crystal clear that anti-establishment rhetoric divides the society into two groups and influenced how people think about politics.

6. Findings

- Populism has been emerged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with the rise of PTI after 2013. It also contributed to transform the political culture of the province.
- The data shows significant surge in political participation and engagement, which indicates the success of populist mobilization.
- PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa construct anti-elites narratives, by presenting itself as honest party and portraying the establishment as corrupt and self-serving.
- Data shows that, Imran Khan is a focal point of PTI politics. All the political decisions are centered on the personality of Khan, which indicates leader-centered politics in KP.
- PTI used social media significantly, to bypass the traditional media and to connect directly with people.
- With the rise of populist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, people loss trust on democratic institutions, such as judiciary, assembly, and anti-corruption bodies.
- PTI acquire immense support through the use of emotional and nationalist political language and discourses.
- Populist politics in KP led to political division in the society, “the common people” and “the corrupt elites”.

7. Recommendations

- Political parties in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa should focus on strengthening democratic institutions, rather than adhering to a single leader.
- Instead of emotional slogans and narratives, PTI should shift their focus on issue-based politics, to address various socio-economic problems.
- Government should educate the citizens on the use of social media and digital platforms, and should aware the people from misinformation and fake news.
- Civil-societies and media organizations should work on promoting respect toward every political party to reduce the division and polarization in the society.
- The government should make efforts on the inclusion of citizens in political activities, especially marginalized groups, so that there will be no gap for populist politics.

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