



The New Pakistan (2018–2024): Youth Mobilization, Populist Politics, and Democratic Aspirations in a Changing Political Landscape

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Abstract: This study explores the evolving political dynamics of Pakistan from 2018 to 2024 under the vision of the so-called "New Pakistan." Focusing on three core dimensions—youth mobilization, populist politics, and democratic aspirations—the research examines how a young, digitally connected population challenged traditional power structures and how populist narratives shaped public discourse and governance. While the rise of youth activism and increased political awareness marked a shift in civic participation, the period also saw institutional tensions, democratic backsliding, and increasing political polarization. The paper critically assesses whether these changes reflect a substantive democratic transformation or a temporary political shift driven by populist appeal.

Key words: New Pakistan, Youth Mobilization, Populism, Democratic Aspirations, Political Polarization, Civil Society, Imran Khan, Pakistan Politics 2018–2024

1. Introduction

The political landscape of Pakistan experienced a notable transformation after the 2018 general elections, marked by the rise of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its populist leader, Imran Khan. The slogan of “Naya Pakistan” (New Pakistan) captured public imagination, particularly among the youth, promising reforms in governance, elimination of corruption, economic revival, and the establishment of a welfare state. These promises resonated with a frustrated electorate disillusioned with the traditional political elite and recurring governance failures. Imran Khan’s charismatic rhetoric positioned him as an anti-establishment reformer, channeling public resentment into a powerful populist movement. This transformation was not merely electoral but ideological, redefining national identity, state-citizen relationships, and expectations of political leadership. The emergence of PTI thus symbolized a break from dynastic politics and a new social contract rooted in accountability and meritocracy (Ahmed, 2020; Yusuf, 2021).

This period also witnessed unprecedented political participation by Pakistan’s youth, facilitated by social media, digital platforms, and a growing culture of political awareness. Youth activism emerged not only in support of populist agendas but also as a force for democratic accountability and civil rights, as seen in student movements, digital campaigns, and grassroots mobilization. However, these aspirations were met with significant institutional challenges, including civil-military tensions, weakening of parliamentary authority, and increased political polarization. Despite the appearance of democratic vitality, the era was also marked by the erosion of press

freedom, judicial manipulation, and governance inefficiencies. This duality raises critical questions about whether Pakistan was truly redefined or if the vision of a “New Pakistan” was a repackaging of old power dynamics under populist slogans. The study aims to critically analyze the political developments of 2018–2024 to assess the nature, depth, and sustainability of Pakistan’s democratic transformation (Khan, 2022; Rashid, 2023).

Theory

This study is grounded in Populism Theory, a concept widely discussed in modern political science and significantly developed by political theorist Ernesto Laclau, who is considered one of its key intellectual architects. Laclau argued that populism is not merely a political style but a way of constructing "the people" against "the elite" through discourse and symbolic representation. In the context of Pakistan (2018–2024), Imran Khan's rise reflects Laclau's notion of a populist leader who claims exclusive legitimacy to represent the will of the people. Khan's narrative of anti-corruption, justice, and national revival under “Naya Pakistan” demonstrates how populism can mobilize large segments of the population, particularly the youth, while also challenging democratic institutions and traditional power structures.

Literature Review

The concept of "New Pakistan" emerged prominently after the 2018 general elections, symbolizing a populist and reformist shift in political discourse under Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. Scholars argue that populism in Pakistan took form through anti-elite narratives, simplified solutions to complex issues, and emotional appeals to nationalism, morality, and justice. This mirrors Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) theory of populism, where political movements create a dichotomy between "the people" and "the corrupt elite" to mobilize mass support. Populism in the Pakistani context also aligns with the global trend of charismatic leaders rising on platforms of radical change, bypassing traditional political institutions (Akhtar, 2020; Laclau, 2005).

Youth mobilization in Pakistan has grown significantly in recent years, particularly due to increased access to digital technologies and dissatisfaction with conventional political elites. Research highlights how social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok have enabled political expression, activism, and protest among young people. In the 2018 elections, over 44% of the electorate comprised youth, a demographic that played a critical role in PTI’s electoral victory. While this enthusiasm was initially channeled through party politics, it later evolved into broader democratic activism, including campaigns for human rights, educational reform, and press freedom. Scholars caution, however, that such digital engagement may lack long-term institutional impact if not supported by civic education and grassroots political training (Ali, 2022).

Despite the promises of democratic renewal, the post-2018 political era has also witnessed democratic erosion and rising polarization. Literature on Pakistani democracy points to weakened parliamentary oversight, increasing judicial activism, and the continued dominance of the military in political decision-making (Rashid, 2023; Lodhi, 2020).

These trends contradict the democratic aspirations initially envisioned in the "New Pakistan" slogan. Analysts argue that while populist leaders often invoke democratic values, their practices may undermine the very institutions meant to uphold them. In Pakistan's case, media suppression, party fragmentation, and accusations of authoritarian governance suggest a fragile democratic landscape struggling to balance public expectations with institutional realities (Baloch, 2021).

Problem Statement

Despite promises of reform under the “New Pakistan” agenda, Pakistan's democratic institutions remained fragile between 2018 and 2024. Populist politics mobilized youth and raised expectations but often clashed with institutional norms. The gap between populist rhetoric and governance realities has led to political polarization, mistrust, and democratic stagnation. This study investigates how youth mobilization and populist leadership have reshaped yet also constrained Pakistan’s democratic trajectory.

Research Objective

1. To examine how youth mobilization and populist leadership between 2018 and 2024 influenced Pakistan’s democratic institutions, political participation, and governance outcomes.

Research Question

1. How did youth-driven support for populist politics under the “New Pakistan” vision shape the democratic and institutional landscape of Pakistan from 2018 to 2024?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design grounded in case study analysis of Pakistan’s political developments from 2018 to 2024.

Data Collection

Primary data is gathered through interviews and secondary data from academic articles, news sources, and policy reports.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns related to youth mobilization, populist discourse, and institutional responses.

Significance

This study is significant as it highlights the evolving role of youth in shaping Pakistan’s political future. It provides insight into how populist politics influence democratic development and institutional integrity. The findings can inform policymakers, scholars, and civil society on fostering inclusive and sustainable democratic practices.

Political Context of Pakistan (Pre-2018)

Before the 2018 general elections, Pakistan’s political landscape was marked by long-standing rivalries between two dominant parties: the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). These parties had alternated in power since the late 1980s, each associated with allegations of corruption, dynastic leadership, and weak institutional reforms. Civil-military relations remained a crucial factor in political decision-making, with the military maintaining a significant behind-the-scenes role. The disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by the Supreme Court in 2017 under Panama Papers revelations further destabilized the political climate, paving the way for new political actors to emerge (Rizvi, 2018).

Review of the 2018 General Elections

The general elections of July 25, 2018, were a turning point in Pakistan’s democratic history, as they marked the decline of traditional dynastic parties and the rise of a populist alternative. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by former cricket star Imran Khan, emerged as the largest party with a majority in the National Assembly, forming a coalition government. The elections were widely contested, and although there was significant voter turnout, some opposition parties alleged pre-poll rigging and institutional bias. Nevertheless, the PTI’s victory reflected a widespread desire for change among the electorate, especially the youth and middle class, who were frustrated with the status quo (Ahmed, 2019).

The Rise of PTI and the Imran Khan Phenomenon

Imran Khan’s political rise is deeply rooted in his transformation from a national sports icon to a charismatic populist leader who promised a "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan). His party, PTI, capitalized on the anti-corruption narrative, economic frustration, and public disillusionment with mainstream political elites. Khan’s simple yet powerful slogans—justice, accountability, and Islamic welfare—resonated with large sections of the population. PTI also effectively leveraged digital platforms to engage youth, framing the party as a movement rather than just a political entity. This new form of political communication disrupted traditional campaigning methods and brought a fresh dynamic to Pakistani politics (Javaid, 2020).

Populist Narrative and Anti-Elite Rhetoric

PTI’s populist rhetoric drew heavily from the theoretical framework of populism, particularly Ernesto Laclau’s concept of constructing a political identity by dividing society into "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." Khan positioned himself as the voice of the common citizen, often attacking traditional political dynasties and bureaucratic inefficiencies. His speeches frequently evoked nationalist sentiments, promised an Islamic welfare

state, and emphasized moral renewal. While this approach successfully mobilized mass support, critics argue it lacked institutional depth and led to political polarization, weakening democratic norms and institutional coherence (Akhtar, 2021; Laclau, 2005).

Youth Activism and Political Engagement in Pakistan

Youth in Pakistan, constituting over 60% of the population, have emerged as a transformative force in national politics, especially in the last decade. This demographic shift has fueled political engagement on a scale previously unseen. While traditionally sidelined in formal politics, Pakistani youth have increasingly taken part in student movements, protest campaigns, and political party activism. Major political parties like PTI and even grassroots movements like Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) have seen enthusiastic youth involvement. Their activism has addressed diverse issues such as education reform, human rights, justice, and accountability. Analysts argue that youth involvement has helped democratize public discourse and challenged the dominance of political dynasties (Naseem & Arif, 2020).

Role of Social Media in Youth Mobilization

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube have revolutionized how youth participate in political discourse and activism in Pakistan. These digital spaces have become arenas for mobilization, awareness-raising, and political education. Youth-led digital campaigns have brought attention to pressing national issues, including economic instability, censorship, and civil liberties. Political parties, particularly PTI, capitalized on this trend by creating youth-oriented online content and mobilizing digital volunteers. The accessibility of smartphones and internet connectivity has allowed youth from even semi-urban and rural areas to engage politically. While this digital empowerment has expanded civic participation, it also presents challenges such as misinformation and online radicalization (Shahbaz & Siddiqui, 2021).

Electoral Impact of Youth Participation

The electoral impact of youth in Pakistan became particularly evident during the 2013 and 2018 general elections, where young voters significantly influenced outcomes. In 2018, youth constituted over 44% of the registered voters, and their turnout was critical in securing victory for PTI. This shift highlighted the increasing political awareness and mobilization of the youth population. Parties restructured their campaigns to attract young voters, emphasizing issues such as employment, education, and anti-corruption. However, while youth participation surged during elections, sustaining that engagement between elections remains a challenge. Researchers suggest institutional support, civic education, and policy inclusion are essential to convert electoral enthusiasm into long-term democratic consolidation (Ali & Farooq, 2022).

Populist Governance in Pakistan (2018–2024)

The rise of populism in Pakistan, particularly under the leadership of Imran Khan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), presented a new model of governance that emphasized anti-elite rhetoric, charismatic leadership, and promises of sweeping reform. Populist governance in Pakistan relied heavily on mobilizing mass sentiment against the status quo and projecting the state as a tool of the "pure people" rather than a neutral institution. This approach allowed PTI to consolidate support among the youth and urban middle class, using slogans like "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan) to symbolize hope, justice, and accountability. However, once in power, populist promises proved difficult to implement. Complex governance realities—including a weak economy, external debt, and entrenched bureaucratic inertia—challenged the populist agenda. While the PTI administration initiated programs like Ehsaas (a social safety net) and promoted anti-corruption measures, many of its institutional reforms remained surface-level or stalled in implementation due to lack of capacity or resistance from within the system (Ahmed, 2020). Populist governance also created friction between elected representatives and established institutions such as the judiciary, bureaucracy, and military. The PTI government often framed institutional critique as political sabotage, painting dissenting voices within or outside the system as "enemies of reform." This further deepened civil-military tensions and undermined the principle of institutional autonomy. Khan's confrontational stance toward the judiciary and opposition also mirrored classic populist strategies observed globally, wherein populist leaders bypass institutional checks by appealing directly to the public. These dynamics weakened the procedural integrity of democratic institutions, fostering an environment where loyalty and rhetoric took precedence over legal or constitutional norms. Despite some initial enthusiasm, this model of governance proved volatile and short-lived,

with Imran Khan's eventual ousting through a no-confidence vote in 2022 highlighting the limitations of populism in sustaining institutional order in Pakistan (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2022).

Polarization

Populist governance in Pakistan significantly intensified political polarization, as populist discourse tends to frame political issues in binary terms: the righteous people versus the corrupt elite. Under PTI's rule, this dynamic polarized society, media, and state institutions, reinforcing mistrust among different political actors and societal groups. The aggressive use of state media, along with the rise of politically aligned influencers on social platforms, created echo chambers that sidelined fact-based debate and marginalized dissenting views. The result was an erosion of democratic culture where ideological diversity and political dialogue were viewed with suspicion. This polarization also filtered into the civil bureaucracy and judiciary, institutions that are meant to function independently but increasingly became targets of political accusations or instruments of political maneuvering. Over time, this adversarial style of politics contributed to administrative inefficiencies, a decline in institutional credibility, and an increase in public cynicism about democratic processes (Khan & Ahmed, 2021).

The most damaging institutional challenge posed by populist governance was the weakening of meritocracy and policy continuity. In a populist political environment, policymaking tends to be reactive, emotionally driven, and designed to appeal to public sentiment rather than based on expert consultation or long-term planning. Frequent transfers of bureaucrats, threats to judicial independence, and sidelining of institutional experts hampered the state's ability to function cohesively. Populist governments, while often promising reform, generally lack the patience for institutional development, which requires long-term investments and political consensus. In Pakistan, this led to a governance vacuum, where decisions were made impulsively and reversals became common, leading to instability and reduced investor confidence. Ultimately, rather than strengthening democratic institutions, populism in Pakistan during 2018–2024 left them more fragmented and fragile (Zahid, 2023).

Institutional Challenges

1. **Bureaucratic Instability and Politicization.** Under populist governance, Pakistan's bureaucracy experienced frequent transfers and political interference, weakening institutional efficiency. Imran Khan's government often bypassed merit and replaced bureaucrats based on loyalty rather than performance. This created insecurity among civil servants and discouraged independent decision-making, ultimately disrupting policy continuity and weakening state institutions (Khan, M. A., & Ahmed, R. (2021)
2. **Politicization of the Judiciary.** The judiciary came under increased pressure during PTI's rule. While favorable judgments were praised, critical verdicts were labeled as conspiracies, undermining the perception of judicial neutrality. The use of legal institutions to target opposition and dissenting voices blurred the line between justice and political revenge, threatening the independence and credibility of the courts (Yilmaz, I., & Shakil, K. (2022).
3. **Decline of Parliamentary Function and Civil-Military Friction.** The role of parliament was sidelined through the use of ordinances and lack of consensus-building. At the same time, civil-military relations became strained after initial cooperation. The breakdown in ties between the PTI and the military following Khan's ouster in 2022 exposed the fragility of institutional balance and democratic authority in Pakistan (Zahid, H. (2023).

Democracy & Future: Assessing Democratic Progress, Public Trust, and Reform Needs

Democratic Progress and Political Participation. From 2018 to 2024, Pakistan's democratic trajectory has been marked by both milestones and challenges. The electoral victory of PTI in 2018 was seen as a shift in political consciousness, with promises of transparency, anti-corruption reforms, and the empowerment of the common citizen. Increased voter participation, especially among youth and urban populations, signaled a rising political awareness and demand for change. Civil society organizations and media continued to play a watchdog role, pushing for accountability and inclusive governance. However, democratic progress was hindered by growing political polarization, weak parliamentary performance, and intermittent restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. Despite regular elections and vibrant political activity, critics argue that democratic norms remained

fragile, with power still centralized in elite hands and informal institutions often overshadowing formal democratic frameworks (Riaz, A. (2021).

Public Trust and Reform Needs

Public trust in democratic institutions in Pakistan has seen fluctuations due to inconsistent governance, elite dominance, and accountability failures. The promise of "Naya Pakistan" created optimism, but unfulfilled reforms, economic hardships, and perceptions of selective accountability led to growing disillusionment. Institutional weaknesses—particularly in the judiciary, police, and local governments—continue to erode confidence in the system. For democracy to mature, reforms must focus on strengthening parliamentary oversight, ensuring judicial independence, promoting civic education, and depoliticizing state institutions. Additionally, decentralization and empowered local governments are crucial to deepen democratic roots. The future of democracy in Pakistan depends on meaningful electoral reforms, rule of law, and inclusive governance that goes beyond rhetoric and delivers tangible improvements to public welfare (Yilmaz, I., Morieson, N., & Demir, M. (2022).

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