



RESEARCH PAPER

The Dynamics of Right-Wing Populism: A Comparative Study of Political Leadership and Institutional Impact in Pakistan and Iran

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of nationalism, religion, and anti-elite rhetoric by right-wing populist leaders Imran Khan in Pakistan and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran to achieve political power. Populist leaders tend to emerge when the masses are discontented with the political system. In Pakistan and Iran, Khan and Ahmadinejad relied on the symbols of religion and national pride to demonstrate themselves as the defenders of the common people, despite the fact that there are two systems of these countries, one of which is democratic and another theocratic. Paper applied qualitative comparative case study. Both leaders did manage to gain the support of masses through emotional and symbolic appeals. Enhance the democratic institutions, safeguard judicial independence, advance political education, and adopt reasonable economic reforms to narrow the dangers of populist leadership. The comparison should be expanded in future research in order to detect global patterns.

KEYWORDS

Right-Wing Populism, Imran Khan, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Religion and Politics, Populist Leadership, Democratic Institutions, Islam and Populism

Introduction

Populism poses a threat not to democracy but illustrates the lack of deeper systematic issues within the liberally structured democratic system. Populist movements arouse from widespread dissatisfactions within modern liberal democratic systems that tend to emphasize and operate as legalistic and government by expert's lack of true political participation or representation. The overemphasis on legalism and the neglect of political engagement creates a gap between the governing bodies and the society, which results in the feelings of dissatisfaction that motivates people to seek alternatives that promise a return to direct and participatory democratic government. Therefore, populism is a reaction towards inadequacies imposed by liberal democracies, dulling the need for self-examination and reform aim to appease the intense of furry of people (Philip, 2021) A renowned populism expert Cas Mudde a definition that is frequently used and influences a lot of current research. He claims that the populism is a "thin -centered ideology" that splits society into two antagonistic, morally different groups: "the innocent people and dishonest elites". It maintains that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. According to Mudde, populism's weakness is its ideological incompleteness it has a comprehensive policy agenda and in order to articulate itself politically it must attach itself to a larger host ideology such as nationalism or socialism (Mudde, 2023). Ernesto Laclau a prominent political theorist from Argentina, developed ideology and discourse carefully advancing a post-Marxist theory of politics. After earning his PhD in the UK in

1977, he spent many years teaching political theory at university of Essex. There, he established a doctoral program in the study of ideologies and discourse creating the theoretical groundwork for the now famous "Essex school". Laclau had a close interest in Latin American politics into his later years (Biopolitica, 2018).

Structural flaws in the state frequently give rise to populism particularly in nations with undeveloped, unequally distributed, or excessively centralized institutions. People are more inclined to back populist leaders who assert that they represent the common people against dishonest or arrogant elites when nations are unable to provide basic necessities while dominating power in their own hands, these leaders frequently take benefit of already existing disparities by promising justice and reform. In these situations, populism transforms from a political stance from a reaction to profound discontent with the way the state operates. These dynamics are evident in nations like Pakistan and Iran, where right wing populist leaders have consolidated their power and reshape governance in a way that avoid established check and balances by taking advantage of weak institutional capacity, economic hardship, and growing mistrust of growing political elites (Joo, 2024). Imran Khan's rise and political path are highly consistent with the idea of empty populism which prioritize symbolic appeal and emotional exaggeration over practical governance tactics. A hallmark of populist speech. Khan portrayed himself as nation's savior by utilizing religious and nationalism symbolism especially the idea of Riyast-e-Madina (Chohadry & Muzaffar, 2025) A disillusioned people responded well to his speech, which constantly emphasized foreign intrigues, corruption and anti-elitism. But once in power his populism limitations were exposed by his incapacity to convert catchphrases into workable policy solutions. An analysis of his leadership appeals a classic populist lifecycle: beginning as an outsider becoming popular with the general public by using anti-elite narratives, experiencing problems in governance and finally projecting himself as the victim of institutional betrayal and conspiracy. This raises concerns about the enduring power of populist leaderships in weak democracies like Pakistan by demonstrating how "hollow populism" can maintain support in the near terms but fail to provide sustainable governance (Waheed, 2025) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presented a clearly populist rentier type of government in Iran from 2005 until 2013. In order to gain public legitimacy, especially among poorer class and rural communities his leadership mostly depended on the allocation of oil earnings. Ahmadinejad took a combative posture against both western powers and domestic elites while increasing subsidies, cash giveaways, and welfare programs. His popularity was momentarily increased by his populist strategy but Iran's long-term economic stability was endangered. Mismanagement and the country's reliance on oil rents increased inflation, unemployment and fiscal imbalance, weakening Iran's institutional framework. Thus, Ahmadinejad populism is a prime example of how rentier economies allow presidents to rally support by temporary distributive measures, while also undermining institutional strength and increasing economic vulnerabilities (Mahmoudi, 2025).

Literature Review

Numerous authors have studied the growth of populism, such as Sergei Guriev and Elias Papaioannou argues that populism is a reaction to institutional failures, cultural fears and economic disruption. They say that employing patriotic and exclusive language, right wing populism often frames politics as moral conflicts between the people and dishonest leaderships. Dani Rodrik's which emphasizes political disengagement and economic inequality as key causes of contemporary populism (Guriev, Sergei, & Elias, 2020). Another author Buket Oztas' paper says Islamic populism in nation with a majority of Muslim's mobilize support by using religious identity and anti-elite argumentation often against authoritarian governments. By including marginalized populations, it encourages

democracy but ozatz says that it can also weaken democratic institutions and results in authoritarianism, as it is in the nations like Egypt and Turkey. Ozatz notes that by appealing to religious and nationalist feelings and using anti-elite language Imran Khan's populism in Pakistan frames himself as an advocate for common people against an unjust system. His anti-corruption populist speeches also sparked authoritarian actions that threatened democratic institutions. Khan's rise in the years after Mussaraf marked a change in Pakistan's political climate toward nationalism and religious identity. Concerns have been expressed over the impact of this populist authoritarian combine on democratic norms and governance (Butt, 2023). Also, according to Monshipouri, Mahmood, and Manochehr Dorraj the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad signified a dramatic turn towards charismatic right-wing populism based on social justice ideals and anti-elitism. By portraying himself as a modest outsider opposing dishonest ruling class. But during this leadership there was more instability, institutional decline and political division. Although Ahmadinejad attracted a large following author points out that this combative language, control over power and inability to provide lasting solutions led to broad popular discontent and exposed the weak foundations of Iranian populist governance (Monshipouri, 2021) Another article says strongman leaders that use nationalism, emotional appeal and anti-elite narratives are hallmarks of the growth of populism in the nations like Israel, Pakistan, Turkey, India and United States. It highlights how popular dissatisfactions with conventional politics and institutions often gives rise to such revolutions. The article makes the case that by expanding power, diminishing judicial independence, and restricting media freedom, populist politicians weaken democratic institutions. It comes to the conclusion that despite the initial appearance of empowering the society populism often results in institutional loss and democratic backsliding (Anwer, 2024). Ali M. Ansari says, in order to appeal to the public, Ahmadinejad used right wing populism by fusing religious symbolism specifically allusions to the twelfth imam with nationalism and anti-elitist discourse. This book highlights his aggressive populist strategies in both internal and international affairs, as well as how they serve to conceal more significant structural issues with Iran's democratic system. According to Ansari Ahmadinejad's strategy offered temporary populist fixes rather than long term changes reflecting larger difficulties in post-revolutionary Iran (Ansari, 2007). While there is a lot of research on right wing populism in western context but lack of comparative analysis focusing on Muslim majority non-western countries like Pakistan and Iran. Specifically, little is known about the unique ways in which nationalist rhetoric, religious symbolism, and anti-elite speech have been employed by leaders such as Ahmadinejad and Imran Khan. Our comparison of how right-wing populism functions in various institutional, cultural and political context outside of the west is constrained by this disparity.

Material and Methods

The growth of right -wing populism in Iran under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Pakistan under Imran Khan is examined in this study using qualitative comparative case study methodology. Secondary sources such as scholarly publications, political speeches, articles, journals, news reports were used to gather data. Important populist components including nationalism and anti-elitism and strong leadership was examined using thematic content analysis. Despite having different political systems both of these cases were chosen because of their regional relevance and ideological resemblance. Access to original data and possible source bias are among limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Ideational Theories and Discursive Theories of Populism

Two key concepts on populism are applied in this study: the Ideational Theory by Cas Mudde and the Discursive Theory by Ernesto. The concepts enable us to know how leaders like Imran Khan in Pakistan and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran manipulate ideas and words to gain popularity.

Ideational Theory of populism (Cas, Mudde)

According to Mudde people in populism, it is not a total system. It is a narrow concept that clings itself on broader concepts such as nationalism or socialism. He points out at the division of society into two categories namely: the good people and the corrupt elite. People have leaders who purport to represent them and struggle against corrupt leaders (Mudde, 2004).

The same framework was applied by both leaders in the case of Imran (Khan) and Mahmoud (Ahmadinejad). They portrayed themselves as the protector of the common people, and as the confrontation of the established political party. As an example, Khan discussed Riyasat-e-Madina, a religious ideal that caused him to seem a morally upright and fair leader, whereas Ahmadinejad employed the language of social justice to demonstrate that he was a lowly, anti-elite champion of the poor.

Nevertheless, Mudde also notes that populism in itself does not have a clear and comprehensive set of policies. It requires a greater ideology to be effective. The populism of Khan was associated with nationalism and Islamic concepts that enabled him to challenge the political elite in Pakistan. The populism led by Ahmadinejad was nationalist coupled with revolutionary Islamic, which provided him with more ground.

The anti-elite rhetoric and the symbolic language are also mentioned in the framework created by Mudde. These were successful tactics employed by Khan and Ahmadinejad; however, both found it a hard task to translate popularity into good government.

Discursive Theory of Populism (Ernesto, Laclau)

Laclau dwells upon the construction of a collective identity by means of words. He believes that populism is the result of conversation and that the leaders can connect the various groups by making issues sound the part. It is not a predetermined collection of ideas but a loose narrative that emerged out of numerous demands (Laclau, 2005).

According to this perspective, leaders are entrepreneurs in politics creating a sense of identity. They apply religious and national imagery. The mention of Islam and Riyasat-e-Madina by Khan and Shiite Islam and revisionism by Ahmadinejad makes one feel that Pakistan is the rightful leader of the Islamic world as opposed to the Western hegemony and local elites.

Laclau discusses empty signifiers. These are expressions or signs that people have the ability to decipher in numerous ways but are passionate about. Examples include the slogan used by Khan, Naya Pakistan (New Pakistan) and the discussion of Islamic justice used by Ahmadinejad. They bring together different groups despite the fact that the meanings are loose.

Critics believe that the perspective Laclau has overlooks the institutional and structural influences of politics. In the examples of Khan and Ahmadinejad, their speech of popularity united people, however, they tended to ignore the complicated processes of governance. This gave rise to issues after the leaders assumed power.

The ideational theory by Mudde clarifies the very notions that people get attracted to populism and discursive theory by Laclau demonstrates how these concepts are made into actions. They jointly describe how, through symbolic rhetoric, anti-elite feeling and emotion, Khan and Ahmadinejad manufacture an identity in masse. Both theories share the same opinion that populist success depends not only on the ability to establish a common identity but also keep good promises, which is in many cases a flaw of such leaders.

Results and Discussion

The paper examines the case of right-wing populism in Pakistan under Imran Khan and Iran under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It depicts how the two leaders employed the concept of nationalism, religion, and anti-elite discourse to gain favor. They projected themselves as champions of the common man against the corrupted aristocrats. Khan discussed the future Islamic welfare state, and Ahmadinejad invoked the Shi symbols to establish the moral leadership of the Muslims. Despite the initial popularity, they brought severe issues to the table, which undermined democracy through their rule.

The tactics of the both leaders were similar. Their rhetoric was very loud against elites and purported to represent the good people. They emphasized national pride and religion so that the message they wanted to pass across is powerful. As Mudde (2004) claims, populism divides the society into good people and corrupt elites. This concept appeared in Pakistan as well as Iran and each of the leaders was under the pretence that he represented the people and the oppressed. Khan associated his vision of New Pakistan with the Islamic values, whereas Ahmadinejad was concerned with the social justice, national pride, and resistance to the influence of the West.

They had big limits, in spite of their popular speech, through the manner they ruled. Waheed (2025) described the populism of Khan as being vacuous. It was all based on emotions and symbolic actions and not actual policy changes. His tenure in office was characterized by battles with courts and legislators that resulted in more division and deterioration of checks and balances that is critical to the democracy. This hollow populism rendered political culture weak in Pakistan and thus governance was in a manner of reaction rather than addressing problems.

Short-term strategies such as cash handouts and subsidies were also highly relied on by Ahmadinejad. Though these made him popular in the short run, they did not solve the fundamental problems of Iran. Mahmoudi (2025) declared that the rentier-state model, which involves redistribution of oil money, was a two-sided sword. It benefited labor and rural citizens, however, it weakened the economy of Iran, increasing rates of inflation and unemployment. His confrontational approach to internal elites and the West brought more instability within the country and destabilized the institutions in Iran.

The personalities of the two leaders were very strong, which led to their failure in this regard, as it ultimately damaged institutional power and emotion appeals. Their populist agendas were successful in gathering a mass support but failed to establish democratic systems permanently. Monshipouri and Dorraj (2021) cautioned that with the support gained, the populism of Ahmadinejad allowed the executive to become stronger and the fragile Iranian democracy to be weaker. In a similar scenario, the anti-elite speech of Khan in Pakistan tended to gravitate towards dictatorship violating democratic principles and alienating dissent.

The paper demonstrates the impact of right-wing populism in the post-colonial world in a different manner. Khan and Ahmadinejad employed nationalism and religion as an instrumental tool, which was influenced by the circumstances of the countries. According to Butt, Munawar, and Masood (2023), populism in such environments is a response to the economic and political issues that have existed over a long period of time. Leaders make use of symbols to reach out to individuals that feel rejected. The comparison of the two ones allows to understand that populism in such nations struggles against external dominance (such as the West power) and internal corruption. This struggle gives the movement momentum but it also fixes it on fixed notions which complicate the process of governance.

Khan and Ahmadinejad demonstrate the two-tailed aspects of populism in the non-Western democracies. It can bring the poor nearer to the frontline and it can mobilize people to engage in politics, however, it tends to undermine democratic institutions and instead accumulate power. Their styles expose a complex relationship between populism and democracy and nationalism in the post-colonial settings.

Discussion

When comparing the right-wing populism of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran with Imran Khan in Pakistan, it becomes clear that both leaders took advantage of the public's long-standing discontent with political elites, economic disparity, and moral deterioration. Their ascent was based on a common populist logic that pitted "the clean people" against "the corrupt elite," creating two opposed groups in society. But in contrast to the largely ideological nature of Western populism, these movements found legitimacy in nationalism and religion, turning these aspects of culture into potent political tools. Both leaders positioned themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and moral reformers, representing the hopes of the average citizen against both foreign and internal oppressors. The core of Imran Khan's populism was the concept of *Riyasat-e-Madina*, which invoked Islamic values of moral leadership, justice, and welfare. By using this story, he was able to portray his political movement as a spiritual quest as opposed to a traditional party fight. His focus on social justice, anti-corruption, and Islamic identity struck a strong chord with Pakistan's middle and lower classes, who felt shut out of the country's elite-dominated political system. Similar to this, Ahmadinejad's populism combined nationalist pride with Shi'a revolutionary iconography to present Iran as the moral and spiritual head of the Muslim world. He was able to establish his leadership as both really national and inspired by God by portraying himself as a humble servant of the people. The results show that although both leaders used religious and nationalist rhetoric to accomplish impressive popular mobilization, their populist governance had a destabilizing influence on political culture and democratic institutions. Khan's ongoing conflicts with the courts, parliament, and opposition parties in Pakistan exacerbated polarization and undermined institutional balance. By portraying political disagreement as a betrayal of the country and faith, his rhetoric frequently undermined the legitimacy of dissenting voices. By ignoring institutional accountability and escalating conflicts between the presidency and clerical authorities, Ahmadinejad's tenure in Iran strengthened executive power inside an already theocratic system. In both cases, populist spectacle took precedence over long-term structural change, and governance grew more symbolic, reactive, and individualized. The study's dual character of populism in post-colonial contexts is another important finding. On the one hand, it empowers underprivileged groups by giving people a sense of representation and voice in inflexible political structures. However, by reducing politics to emotional appeals and moral dichotomies, it undercuts pluralism. Both presidents had a powerful moral platform thanks to the instrumental use of nationalism and religion, but it also made it harder to distinguish between politics and religion, turning public discussions

into moral crusades. Because political legitimacy was now linked to assertions of divine or patriotic authenticity rather than democratic consensus, this merger made compromise and communication more challenging. The debate emphasizes that it is impossible to analyze right-wing populism in the Global South as a copy of populism in the West. Rather, it needs to be viewed as a unique event influenced by social injustices, colonial history, and the pursuit of moral sovereignty. Populism was a reaction to perceived internal corruption and external dominance, whether it was Western political influence or pressures from the global economy, in both Pakistan and Iran. This resistance drew its emotional energy from nationalism, and its moral vocabulary from religion. Together, they created a populist framework that ultimately hampered the advancement of democratic governance but struck a deep chord with disenchanted citizens. The findings, taken together, confirm that right-wing populist leadership in Iran and Pakistan revitalized public engagement and reinterpreted political legitimacy by using religious and patriotic rhetoric. However, it also increased division, undermined institutional integrity, and individualized political power. The paper illustrates the paradox of right-wing populism in post-colonial states by looking at these two cases: while it promises justice, unity, and rebirth, it frequently leads to ideological rigidity, institutional fragility, and democratic retreat. This knowledge advances a more comprehensive analysis of how nationalism and religion continue to influence populist politics in the Global South, undermining the chances for inclusive and long-term democratic growth.

Conclusion

The examples of right-wing populism in the case of Imran Khan and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad demonstrate how robust nationalism and religious icons can influence the populist leaders of the non-Western democracies. Both leaders posed as defenders of the common people, where anti-elitism lingo was used to win over the masses. However, their populist movements undermined the democratic institutions as well. Khan acquired power through the votes, but his populist speech marginalized the political opposition, undermined the checks and balances and divided Pakistan. The populism employed by Ahmadinejad mobilized the power and played with the institutions of Iran through its semi-authoritarian system.

Although the political environments were not similar, the two leaders employed populist strategies that were based on emotions instead of substantive solutions to govern the nation. These movements developed due to a significant amount of rage towards the elites and institutions, yet the final outcome was the destruction of democratic regulations. The comparison indicates that populism in post-colonial states is a special form, a struggle against foreign occupation and a power centralization mechanism.

At both instances, populism was a two-sided sword. It made the voices of the marginalized people heard, and, at the same time, it reinforced the same power structures that it claimed to be against. Such findings imply that the way forward in addressing the issue of populism should be focused on strengthening the democratic institutions and ensuring the judicial system remains independent in addition to educating the people on politics to mitigate the risks of having populist leaders.

Recommendations

In order to address the issue posed by right-wing populism Pakistan and Iran should focus on building democratic institutions, promoting media freedom and ensuring courts independence to prevent the consolidation of power. Economic disparity must be removed by open and honest policies as social and economic issues often act as a catalyst

for populist movements. Citizens can also be helped to critically assess populist speech by increasing political knowledge and civic involvement. In conclusion future research should broaden the comparative scope to better understand the global patterns of right-wing populism and its long-term impact on public governance.

- Establish good democratic structures. Courts should be reinforced, free media favored and checks and balances maintained by each country in order to prevent concentration of power in the hands of populist leaders.
- Educate people on politics and how populism speech can be dangerous. The increase of political knowledge and critical thought will assist the citizens not to get sucked into the emotional or anti-elite promises.
- Do real economic reforms. Both Iran and Pakistan require policies that lead to inequality, inflation rate and long-term growth that would ensure people less likely believe in redistribution in the short term.
- Foster political differentiation. The division that arises as a result of populist rhetoric can be diminished by open conversation between various parties and trust may come back to democracy.

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