



## Empty Populism and the Life Cycle of a Populist Leader: A Case Study of Imran Khan

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### Abstract

*This study scrutinizes the phenomenon of empty populism, focusing on the political trajectory of Imran Khan. It explores how his rhetoric aligns with the theoretical framework of populism and measures the evolution of his leadership through different phases. By investigating his speeches and political discourse, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which populist leaders sustain their appeal despite governance failures. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the research applies Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model to examine the linguistic patterns and discursive strategies employed by Imran Khan over different phases of his political career. This study raises significant queries about the sustainability of populist leadership. Khan's case study proves the life cycle of a populist leader, from rise to power to potential decline. Argues that "empty populism" can only take a leader so far, and that the lack of practical policies can ultimately lead to disappointment among supporters.*

*The finding provides a nuanced understanding of Imran Khan's populist leadership and its implications. While Khan charismatic appeal and emotional rhetoric helped him gain power, the study suggests that his lack of clear policies and reliance on "empty populism" may ultimately undermine his legacy.*

*Further studies could explore the long-term consequences of populist leadership, examining how leaders like Khan navigate the challenges of governance while maintaining their populist appeal. Additionally, research could investigate the role of social media and other factors in amplifying populist rhetoric and its impact on democratic institutions.*

### Keywords

Empty Populism, Populist Life Cycle, Political Communication, Imran Khan

### Introduction

The term "populism" is often used, yet it is ill-defined and elusive. A comprehensive general theory or universal definition is still lacking, despite the fact that the word has definite meanings in certain settings. However, a political appeal to the people and a claim to legitimacy grounded in the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule are characteristics shared by populists in a variety of social and economic circumstances (Enli, 2025). Accordingly, There are two prominent connotations of the term populism in public discussion, both of are exceptionally contentious and critical. In the first instance, populism states to the politics of the *Stammtisch* (the pub), i.e. an extremely sensitive and unsophisticated language aiming at the people's "gut sentiments." In words, populists want to sever the Gordian knots of modern politics with the sword of ostensibly easy answers (Bergsdorf, 2000). In the second sense, populism refers to opportunistic measures aimed at (immediately) satisfying the people/voters and to getting their support, rather than seeking for the 'best alternative'. Spite of the fact that both conceptions of populism are universally acknowledged and appear to have some inherent merit; they do not address the core of what is commonly referred to as populist in academic literature. In reality, both processes are best described by other terms: demagoguery and opportunism (Klingemann, 2004).

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Populism, which is frequently referred to as a phenomenon viscerally related to twentieth-century extremisms, is perhaps concurrent with right-wing radicalism and in some cases, with left-wing radicalism. When the word "populist" is used to some of the institutionalized parties' political leaders, the issue becomes extremely complicated (Gherghina et al., 2013). While, Rodrik (2018) describes populism as 'a loose label that encompasses a diverse set of movements', also Taranu (2012) claims that this 'covers more political and social realities than one single term would normally concentrate from a semantic point of view'.

Imran Khan, former Prime Minister of Pakistan and leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has been a prominent figure in South Asian populism (Faiz, 2022). His political career embodies the characteristics of empty populism, 'a style of leadership that emphasizes rhetoric over governance' (Laclau, 2005; Stepinska, 2020). This study aims to analyse Imran Khan's political communication, tracing the trajectory of his leadership through various stages of a populist life cycle

**Problem Statement**

Populist leaders depend on comprehensive emotive appeals and anti-elitist rhetoric, usually, without functional policy agendas, a phenomenon known as empty populism. Though, such leadership follows a probable trajectory, from rise as an outsider to governance struggles, ultimate downfall, and either political insignificance or reinvention. This study observes the life cycle of Imran Khan's leadership through the lens of empty populism, examining media discourse, and political rhetoric. By applying theoretical visions from Laclau, Weyland, and Mudde, this research aims to discover whether empty populism contributes to both the rise and decline of populist leaders in the context of Pakistan.

**Objectives of the study**

Following are the objectives of the study:

- To explain and theorize empty populism in political communication.
- To examine the various stages of a populist leader's life cycle.
- To scrutinize how Imran Khan's rhetoric and political strategies align with the framework of empty populism.

**Literature Review**

Populism as content, refers to the civic communication of central components of populist ideology that usually revolve around the key messages or frames of people-centrism and anti-elitism. While, populism as style refers to the details of how these populist ideology-expressing messages are frequently linked to the employment of a certain set of presentational style features (de Vreese et al., 2018).

Based on the use of distinctive content and style elements, Aalberg et al. (2017), identified various types of populism. Reference to and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and the rejection of outgroups are all components of complete populism. While anti-elitist populism includes both references and appeals to the people, excluding populism exclusively consists of these elements and excludes out-groups. Lastly, empty populism just makes references and appeals to the general public (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

**Empty Populism**

The concept of empty populism primarily influenced by Ernesto Laclau's theory of "empty signifiers," which proposes that populist movements frequently employ ambiguous and expressively charged rhetoric to unite assorted social groups without committing to a specific ideological framework (Robertson, 2024). These rhetorical techniques, like "the people" or "the nation," work by being ambiguous, which makes them powerful yet intellectually empty. According to scholars, modern populist politicians frequently serve as "voids" or "mirrors," reflecting public opinion without firmly establishing their positions on cogent policy objectives (Hauser, 2018). Simply, empty populism is defined as one-dimensional, since the 'empty' impression is related with Ernesto Laclau (2005) where it has slightly different meaning. Suggested as a political message focused to 'the People', favourable of common citizens but discounting other essentials of a defined populism. Populism flourishes on the structure of "empty signifiers," refers to ambiguous terms that merge various groups e.g., "the people" vs. "the corrupt elite". In the case of Imran Khan, his rhetoric rotates around the binary opposition of the "pure people" vs. the "corrupt elite," which is a common feature of empty populism (Faiz, 2022).

Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt (2021) build on this theory by stressing the performative and discursive aspects of populist politics, arguing that leaders generate identity through spectacle and

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emotional appeal rather than actual political policies. Furthermore, recent research has emphasized the emotional components of populism, specifically the use of nostalgia and social unhappiness as unifying but ambiguous feelings that reinforce the hollow populist narrative (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). Blassnig (2021) believes that populist communication involves both content (messages) and style (delivery), emphasizing direct engagement with the people while excluding certain population sectors (Blassnig, 2021). This is evident in Khan's speeches, where he frames his political struggle as a moral battle against corrupt elites while presenting himself as the sole representative of the people's will.

**The Life Cycle of a Populist Leader**

Weyland (2001) and Levitsky & Roberts (2011) suggested a framework for the life cycle of populist leaders, which consists of five key stages: (i) Emergence (Outsider Phase): The leader positions themselves as a political outsider. (ii) Rise and Consolidation (Heroic Phase): in this stage the leader advances electoral success and increases influence. (iii) Governance and Crisis (Struggle Phase): leader faces directorial challenges (iv) Fall and Resistance (Martyrdom Phase): the leader frames their failure as an attack on democracy. (v) Post-Populist Phase (Irrelevance or Rebirth): Either fades from politics or attempts a comeback.

Stepinska (2020) categorizes populist communication into exclusionary, anti-elitist, and empty populism, with empty populism being the most representative of the phenomenon. In Pakistan, Imran Khan's leadership follows this pattern, moving from a populist opposition figure to a struggling leader facing governance crises and eventual removal.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design, aiming to understand the deeper meanings and implications behind Imran Khan's populist discourse. The key method used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, which provides a systematic approach to analysing political communication. The model contains:

**Descriptive Level** which involves linguistic analysis focusing on word choices, repeated slogans, emotional appeals, and metaphors used by Imran Khan in his speeches. Keywords, sentence structure, and thematic consistency are examined to determine how they contribute to his populist appeal.

**Interpretive Level** examines the association between discourse and the social context. It analyses how Khan's language constructs social identities, portrays political opponents, and positions himself as a moral and national saviour. This helps reveal how discourse functions to establish and maintain power dynamics. And **Social Level** observes the wider socio-political implications of Khan's rhetoric within Pakistan's democratic and institutional framework. It focuses on how his discourse influences public opinion, democratic norms, and institutional relations.

Data was collected from a purposive sample of Imran Khan's speeches, interviews, political statements, and social media posts between 2011 and 2023. Key speeches were selected based on their relevance to different stages of his political career, particularly during pivotal moments such as election campaigns, governance crises, and his removal from office. Supplementary media reports and academic literature were used to contextualize the discourse within political developments.

The data was coded manually, following an inductive approach, to identify recurring discursive themes and patterns aligned with the theoretical constructs of populism.

**Analysis and Findings****Imran Khan's Populist Rhetoric and Strategies****Anti-elitism and Corruption Narrative**

Imran Khan often represents himself as a reformer engaging against corrupt political elite, framing his struggle as one of moral purity versus systemic corruption (Naeem et al., 2023). This aligns with Mudde's (2004) concept of populism as a thin-centered ideology that splits society into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). His rhetoric consistently highlights that traditional political parties, including PML-N and PPP, have robbed the country's resources, thereby demanding a "clean" leadership to restore justice. E.g. in 2018 Election Campaign Rally, Lahore he frames opposition leaders as corrupt elites, promising justice without outlining clear policy solutions *"Pakistan has been looted by these corrupt dynasties! The Sharifs and Zardaris have built their empires while the common man suffers. I will bring justice and hold these corrupt leaders accountable!"* (Al Jazeera, 2018).

### **Symbolic Language**

Imran Khan uses religious and nationalist symbolism to resonate with the masses, appealing Islamic values and historical narratives such as “Riyasat-e-Madina” (Islamic welfare state) (Kazmi et al., 2023). This strategy reflects other populist leaders who induce historical and moralistic ideals to gain legitimacy (Stepinska, 2020). In 2019, Speech to the Nation on Riyasat-e-Madina, he Uses religious symbolism to unify followers under a broad, emotionally charged vision.

*"We will make Pakistan a true Riyasat-e-Madina, where justice prevails, the poor are protected, and the economy flourishes under Islamic principles. This is my promise to the people of Pakistan!"* (Public News Pakistan, 2019).

### **Conspiracy Theories**

Imran Khan’s rhetoric recurrently contains accusations of foreign interference and internal disloyalties, mainly in relation to his removal from office (Bashir et al., 2022). His claims about an “imported government” and outside interference reflect same populist approaches, in which leaders frame their ruin as composed by external enemies to sustain public sympathy (Waheed & Hussain, 2024). In April 2022, Public Gathering after Ouster he Blames foreign intervention for political failure, aligning with global populist rhetoric *"A foreign conspiracy was hatched against my government! They do not want a leader who stands for an independent Pakistan. This imported government is forced upon us!"* (Islami City, 2022).

### **Imran Khan’s Life Cycle as a Populist Leader**

#### **Emergence (1996-2011)**

PTI is Originated in 1996, primarily struggling for political traction. His image as an outsider was set through his charitable work, predominantly Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital, which helped establish credibility. His appeal rested on his clean image and promise to introduce an alternative to the corrupt political establishment (Faiz, 2022).

#### **Rise and Consolidation (2011-2018)**

Imran Khan gained mass support following a major rally in Lahore in 2011. His use of social media, especially Twitter(X), empowered direct communication with supporters, circumventing traditional media filters. The 2018 elections obvious his electoral success, strengthening his role as Pakistan’s leading populist leader (Stepinska, 2020). During this phase, his discourse was filled with optimism, national pride, and promises of reform under the “Naya Pakistan” (New Pakistan) slogan.

#### **Governance and Crisis (2018-2022)**

Once in power, Khan struggled with economic uncertainty, inflation, and governance challenges. His support on rhetoric rather than policy solutions led to resistance within his own party. His relations with the organizations, initially strong, declined as he resisted institutional pressures (Waheed & Hussain, 2024). Despite performance setbacks, he retained support by shifting focus to moral arguments and portraying himself as a principled leader under siege.

#### **Fall and Resistance (2022-2023)**

In 2022, Imran Khan was removed through a no-confidence vote. Khan launched mass protests and social media campaigns, depicting himself as a victim of a Western-backed conspiracy. His framing of events aligns with global populist leaders who claim oppression when faced with legal and political penalties (Vittori, 2017). His messaging emphasized betrayal and injustice, echoing the “martyrdom phase” described in populist theory. He used digital platforms to rally public opinion, maintaining the narrative of a righteous leader wrongfully removed (Naeem et al., 2023).

#### **Post-Populist Phase (2023-ongoing)**

This phase highlights the adaptive nature of populist rhetoric, which allows leaders to reinvent themselves even after institutional exclusion. Facing legal battles and political restrictions, Khan continues to mobilize his support base through digital activism and public rallies. In 2023, Video Message to Supporters he frames himself as a victim of torture, rallying support through emotional appeal by saying: *"They can put me in jail, but they cannot silence my voice! This is not just my fight; this is the fight for Pakistan’s sovereignty and true freedom!"* (NDTV, 2023). His future remains uncertain, with possibilities of either political restoration or gradual decline (Stepinska, 2020).

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So, Imran Khan's case shows how populist leaders strategically shift their messaging across different phases to maintain relevance and legitimacy. His trajectory offers a valuable lens through which to understand the cyclical dynamics of populist leadership.

### Conclusion

Khan's case study proves the life cycle of a populist leader, from rise to power to potential decline. Argues that "empty populism" can only take a leader so far, and that the lack of practical policies can ultimately lead to disappointment among supporters. Imran Khan's political route aligns with the theoretical framework of populist leadership. His dependence on empty populism continued his fame but failed to translate into operative governance. While Khan's charismatic appeal and emotional rhetoric helped him gain power, the study suggests that his lack of clear policies and reliance on "empty populism" may ultimately undermine his legacy.

This study highlights the role of anti-elitist rhetoric, symbolic language, and conspiracy theories in shaping his leadership style. The findings advocate that populist leaders often struggle with governance once in power, leading to ultimate struggle and crisis.

Moreover, the study supports existing literature on populism, signifying how populist leaders depend on crisis narratives to uphold public support. Future research could discover how digital media impacts populist movements in Pakistan and beyond. A comparative analysis with other populist leaders may further enrich our understanding of the life cycle of populist leadership.

### Recommendations

Future research could compare Imran Khan's populism to that of other global populist leaders, such as Donald Trump and Narendra Modi, to uncover cross-cultural parallels and contrasts. Researchers should also look at the impact of social and mainstream media on influencing and reinforcing populist rhetoric in Pakistan. Furthermore, it is critical to investigate how populist leaders interact with crucial institutions such as the military and judiciary, as well as the implications for democratic norms. Finally, researchers should continue to monitor Khan's changing political strategy and public impact in order to determine if he has had a complete political rebirth.

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