[**Populism and Pakistan**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629273/populism-and-pakistan)

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FOR the past decade, the rise of reactionary and regressive forms of populism across the globe have remained a source of anxiety for progressive and liberal quarters. The paradigmatic cases of such populism include Modi in India, the Brexit movement in the UK, Trump and the Tea Party phenomenon, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, and Duterte in the Philippines. These leaders and their movements have either led or enabled the rise of anti-minority (especially anti-Muslim) sentiment, centralisation of power, and the steamrolling of institutional norms.

In Pakistan’s context, the rise of Imran Khan and the PTI’s win in 2018 has been clubbed by some commentators as part of the larger populist shift in global politics. The reasons for this classification are obvious, even if the judgement itself is flawed. Imran Khan’s accountability rhetoric was populist in nat­ure, his leadership of a coalition of status quo elites posed against the status quo is very similar to what the Conservative or Republican parties did in the UK and US respectively. Similarly, the larger cultural appeals to the ‘nation’ as a whole, rather than specific subgroups of the electorate are all commonly associated with populism as a particular aesthetic of politics.

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Where the comparison falls is on more substantive parameters, such as what’s being done while in government, and the underlying basis of the ruling party’s appeal. On the former, as the upcoming year’s budget and its architects demonstrate, there is little to distinguish this particular dispensation from previous ones that have attempted to kickstart growth through enhanced corporate profitability and consumption. The clubbing of various social protection schemes under one umbrella, and the lack of a sizable increase in its budget over last year’s, show that there are little attempts to widen the fiscal relationship of the government to the citizenry.

Similarly, the ruling party continues to struggle in developing an independent political organisation that can override more sectional interests within the party and outside of it. It is also still reliant on the military establishment for some aspects of its political survival, including the degree to which the opposition is allowed space in vulnerable spaces like the province of Punjab. This is unlike other populist movements that have actually transformed or reconfigured older hierarchies and orders within party organisations, and replaced them with newer ideologues or loyalists. The rise of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party is a particularly pertinent example of this phenomenon.

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What is an underappreciated and less discussed point though is how the rise of populism and reactionary politics in the region and beyond has actually impacted Pakistan’s domestic situation. The most obvious spillover has come from the east, with Modi’s rise and Hindutva’s entrenchment in India recalibrating Pakistan’s domestic political dynamics in a number of ways. The first is the strengthening of the security state and a doubling down on the rationale for its existence in the face of Indian militarism on the border and in Kashmir.

A second spillover, though less obvious, has been the delegitimisation of what one can broadly call the liberal foreign and cultural policy segment in Pakis­tan, represented by groups and activists seeking greater normalisation of ties with India, and improved people-to-people contact. With increased communal violence against Muslims and other minority groups, and the chauvinism of the Hindu right wing becoming more abrasive online and in India’s domestic politics, the narrative of normalisation and of revisiting statist discourse on India stands on considerably weaker grounds. This is in stark contrast to the previous decade, when these positions — usually well established in academic and intellectual discourse — were also more assertive in domestic politics.

Finally, a third spillover of global populism in Pakistan is its help in the revitalisation of what one could call Muslim modernism as cultural identity for the state and for large parts of urban middle-class society. While the roots of this lie in the attendant anxieties around the global war on terror, and the conflation of entire communities with fundamentalist violence, in recent years the populist assault on minority rights and cultures has made Islamophobia an even more pertinent question for diasporic and migrant populations. The adoption of those battles as Pakistan’s foreign and cultural outlook by the state is an important happening linked deeply to these broader global issues.

At the same time, this adoption has strong domestic roots. There is a renewed orientation by political elites towards reviving statist identity around cultural questions of what it means to be Muslim and how that is linked to being Pakistani — whether that’s through pan-Islamic cultural consumption in the shape of TV shows, or the heightened oversight being granted to religious leaders in the way that textbooks are developed, or even more simply, what types of religio-cultural endeavours that the leadership (including the prime minister) seek to patronise and promote. One should situate the announcement of an institute devoted to the study of Sufism and science at the intersection of personal beliefs and cultural assertion of Muslim identity being shaped by global conversations around Islam and its adherents.

In sum, it’s not necessarily accurate to argue that Pakistan is experiencing its own populist moment in exactly the same way as right-wing populists in other parts of the world. The differences in sources of power and actions in government point to an important divergence that should be kept in mind. What should be acknowledged, however, is that the country’s politics is not immune to being shaped by regional and global populisms in a myriad of ways, and that this influence will assert itself in a variety of possibly conservative (or even autocratic) tendencies.

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