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Evolution of Electoral Politics and Populist Tendencies in Pakistan: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical evolution of electoral politics in Pakistan with a special focus on populist tendencies that have shaped its democratic trajectory. From the creation of Pakistan in 1947 to the general elections of 2018, Pakistan's political system has witnessed alternating periods of military rule and democratic revival, often influenced by populist leaders who claimed to represent the will of the 'common people' against corrupt elites. The study emphasizes how figures such as Fatima Jinnah, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, and Imran Khan used populist narratives to mobilize the masses and redefine the country's political discourse. It further argues that while populism has broadened citizen participation and created new spaces for democratic expression, it has also contributed to political instability, weakened institutions, and polarized society. Drawing upon historical, descriptive, and comparative analysis, this paper situates Pakistan's electoral history within broader global populist trends, offering a nuanced understanding of how populism simultaneously strengthens and undermines democratic development. The research concludes that the future of Pakistan's democracy depends upon balancing popular mobilization with institutional accountability and inclusive governance.

Keywords: Evolution, Electoral Politics, Populist Tendencies, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

The history of electoral politics in Pakistan reflects a complex interplay between democracy, populism, and authoritarianism. Since independence, Pakistan has experienced several interruptions to democratic continuity, with the military emerging as a dominant actor in shaping political outcomes. Despite these interruptions, elections have remained central to the country's political legitimacy. Populism has repeatedly surfaced as a political strategy to mobilize the masses by portraying the political elite as corrupt and distant from the people. Populist leaders across Pakistan's history have utilized emotional appeals, nationalist sentiments, and promises of justice and equality to gain support. Yet, the populist wave has often weakened institutions and personalized power. Understanding this dual role of populism—both as a democratizing and destabilizing force—is crucial to comprehending Pakistan's evolving political identity.

2. Historical Evolution of Electoral Politics in Pakistan
2.1 The 1965 Elections and Populist Opposition

The impartial election of members of the National and Provincial Assemblies by the Basic Democrats was one of the most distinctive features of the 1962 Constitution. In January 1965, the country witnessed an indirect presidential election in which five opposition parties united to form a federation. They nominated Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali

Jinnah, as their joint candidate against President Ayub Khan. Fatima Jinnah campaigned vigorously, promising to restore parliamentary democracy, ensure fair employment opportunities, and uphold the people's right to choose their leaders through adult suffrage. Her populist rhetoric and moral integrity resonated with citizens frustrated by authoritarian rule and elite dominance. She emerged as a powerful symbol of democratic resistance, particularly admired by students, women, and urban middle classes.

Ayub Khan, emphasizing political stability and his "Decade of Development," defended his regime's economic achievements while dismissing the opposition's calls for reform. In the indirect election, he secured 63.3 percent of the votes from the Electoral College, while Fatima Jinnah received 34.4 percent. Subsequent indirect elections for the National and Provincial Assemblies again favored Ayub's Convention Muslim League, strengthening his control over the political system. However, allegations of electoral manipulation and centralized authority discredited the government. Growing public resentment led to a mass protest movement in early 1969, culminating in Ayub Khan's resignation. He handed over power to General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, who imposed martial law, dissolved all assemblies, and assumed direct control of the state. Yahya's regime lasted until the tragic separation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

2.2 Bhutto Era and Socialist Populism (1970–1977)

Although Pakistan's experience with democracy has been limited and inconsistent, the country has witnessed two major waves of populism over its 73-year history. The first significant phase was associated with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in the late 1960s and 1970s, who established the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) with a left-wing, socialist ideology. Bhutto, Pakistan's first democratically elected Prime Minister, is widely regarded as the nation's earliest and most influential populist leader. However, the origins of populism in Pakistan predate Bhutto. Figures such as A.K. Fazlul Haq, known as "Sher-e-Bengal," and Maulana Bhashani, often referred to as "Surkh Maulana," laid the groundwork for populist mobilization in Bengal. Both opposed the dominance of feudal and elite interests, promoting the rights of ordinary people, especially peasants. Their political activism in East Pakistan highlighted an anti-elite narrative that resonated deeply with the working class and rural poor, setting the stage for populist politics across both wings of Pakistan. By the late 1960s, populist movements gained momentum in both East and West Pakistan. In the east, Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman mobilized masses with anti-establishment slogans, while in the west; Bhutto rallied the public with socialist and nationalist appeals. Both Mujib and Bhutto criticized the existing political structure, promising to return power to the people through socialism and democratic reform. Bhutto's campaign slogan, "*Roti, Kapra aur Makan*" (bread, clothing, and shelter), captured the imagination of the common man and symbolized his promise of social justice. Following the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Bhutto became Pakistan's Prime Minister and consolidated his position through populist reforms that combined elements of socialism and Islamism. He popularized the idea of "Islamic socialism," asserting that social equality and Islam were compatible. However, as his government became increasingly authoritarian and the religious right gained strength, Bhutto's popularity began to wane. The 1973 Constitution declared Islam as the state religion, and his regime's suppression of opposition parties in two provinces further alienated his supporters, signaling the decline of his populist dominance.

2.3 Islamization and Controlled Democracy (1977–1988)

General Zia-ul-Haq's rule marked an era of authoritarian control disguised as guided democracy. Although he maintained a civilian façade, Zia avoided full civilian governance, fearing the resurgence of popular political movements. In November 1984, he staged a referendum,

modeled after Ayub Khan's earlier tactics, securing 97.7 percent approval with an alleged 62 percent voter turnout. The 1985 non-party elections, though restricted, paved the way for the eventual end of martial law and the emergence of a new class of politicians rooted in local politics. Zia supported anti-PPP organizations to counter the Pakistan Peoples Party's influence. In May 1988, he abruptly dismissed Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo government, accusing it of corruption and failing to advance Islamization. Later that year, Zia announced non-party elections but perished in an unexplained plane crash in Bahawalpur on August 17. His death transformed the political landscape, prompting the Supreme Court to overturn his decree for non-party polls, restoring party-based elections.

Benazir Bhutto, returning from exile in 1986, led the PPP in the 1988 elections with a populist campaign filled with patriotic songs, slogans, and mass enthusiasm. Her victory, symbolized by the chants "Benazir, Benazir" and "Mashriq ki Beti," represented the rebirth of democratic populism. The PPP, contesting independently, faced the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), an alliance formed under the patronage of conservative and pro-Zia factions (Bakhtiar, 2019). The 1988 elections produced a divided mandate: the PPP won 94 National Assembly seats and secured a majority in Sindh, while the IJI gained 56 seats, becoming the main opposition. Despite not achieving an absolute majority, the PPP's triumph ended a decade of military dominance and symbolized the return of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan.

2.4 Democratic Alternation and Dynastic Politics (1988–1999)

With the support of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and eight members from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) achieved a narrow parliamentary victory in the 1988 elections. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan invited Benazir Bhutto to form the government after she secured a working majority. However, her coalition partners soon proved unreliable, and her administration faced strong resistance from the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), a conservative alliance formed by remnants of the military regime. Despite these political constraints, Benazir managed to have the 1989–1990 budget approved by parliament, signaling initial stability. Yet, tensions deepened as her allies—the MQM and Awami National Party (ANP)—withdrew their support, leaving her government vulnerable to opposition attacks. By the end of her first year, the administration was increasingly criticized for inefficiency and corruption, particularly by minority parties and opposition media.

On August 6, 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government on charges of corruption, mismanagement, and weak governance. Fresh elections were held on October 24, 1990, resulting in a decisive victory for the IJI, which captured 37.3 percent of the vote and 105 National Assembly seats, while the PPP won only 54 seats with 36.9 percent (Rizvi, 2013). Nawaz Sharif, the IJI leader, became Prime Minister and began to consolidate his own political identity. During the 1993 elections, Sharif adopted the election symbol of the *Sher* (lion), a powerful symbol of courage and leadership in Punjabi political culture. The campaign saw large rallies across Punjab, with supporters chanting "Qadam barhao Nawaz Sharif, hum tumhare saath hain." However, growing tensions between the President and Prime Minister culminated in Ghulam Ishaq Khan's dismissal of Sharif's government. The 1993 elections once again brought Benazir Bhutto's PPP back to power with 86 seats, compared to 73 for Nawaz Sharif's PML-N and six for the PML-J.

Benazir's second tenure (1993–1996) was short-lived and marred by internal conflicts and allegations of corruption. Her strained relationship with President Farooq Leghari and the military establishment ultimately led to her government's dismissal on November 6, 1996. The military, under General Jahangir Karamat, surrounded government institutions, isolated the Prime Minister's residence, and arrested Benazir's husband, Asif Ali Zardari. The Supreme Court

later upheld the dismissal, citing corruption, administrative failure, and attempts to undermine judicial. In the ensuing 1997 elections, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N achieved a landslide victory, winning 136 of 207 National Assembly seats, while the PPP suffered a devastating defeat, securing only 18 seats (H. Khan, 2009d). Meanwhile, a new political force emerged as Imran Khan founded the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in April 1996, vowing to eliminate corruption and establish justice through a populist platform. His early rallies introduced the slogan "Justice, Accountability, and Anti-Corruption," laying the foundations of a third major political movement in Pakistan's evolving democratic landscape.

Table 2.1 Electoral recode 1988 to 1997 Elections First General Elections PILDAT

1988	1990	1993	1997						
S.No	Parties Name	percent of votes	No of seats	percent of votes	No of seats	percent of votes	No of seats	percent Of votes	No of seats
1	PML-N/IJI	30.16	54	37.37	106	39.86	72	45.88	136
2	PPP/PDA	38.52	93	36.83	44	37.85	86	21.80	18
3	MQM	5.37	13	5.54	15	-	-	3.55	12
4	JUI(F)	1.84	7	2.94	6	2.4	4	1.61	2
5	ANP	2.09	2	1.68	6	1.67	3	2.31	9
6	JWP/BN A	0.36	2	0.61	2	0.27	2	0.29	2
7	BNP	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.66	3
8	PKMA/PMAI	0.24	0	0.35	1	0.49	3	0.33	0
9	Others	1.92	6	4.38	5	12.46	21	9.2	2
10	IND	19.50	27	10.30	22	7.40	15	14.37	22
11	Total	100	204	100	207	100	202	100	204

Source Electoral recode 1988 to 1997 Elections First General Elections PILDAT

2.5 From Military Control to Democratic Transition (2002–2013)

Following Nawaz Sharif's dismissal in the 1999 coup, General Pervez Musharraf consolidated his authority by suspending the 1973 Constitution, dismissing assemblies, and assuming the presidency. Through the 2002 Legal Framework Order (LFO), he expanded presidential powers to dissolve parliament, appoint governors, and dismiss the Prime Minister. The 2002 general elections were held under this semi-military system, with the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League–Quaid (PML-Q) emerging as the largest party with 78 seats, followed by the PPP with 63, and the religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) with 45. Zafarullah Jamali became prime minister through a fragile coalition (K. A. Khan, 2005). Despite promises of democratic revival, the elections were marred by manipulation, uneven treatment by the Election Commission, and the use of state resources to ensure a pro-regime outcome. Musharraf government, while praised internationally for its economic stability and role in the War on Terror, continued to suppress opposition and engineer politics from above, establishing what scholars called "managed democracy."

In 2008, Musharraf's rule began to unravel amid public discontent and political realignments. The National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) of 2007 sought to ease tensions with exiled leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, who returned to Pakistan to participate in elections. However, Benazir's tragic assassination on December 27, 2007, transformed the political landscape, and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, assumed PPP leadership. The 2008 elections, held on February 18 after delays, produced a fractured parliament with no single-party majority. The PPP won 92 seats, PML-N 68, and PML-Q 53, while the MQM and ANP secured 25 and 13 respectively. The results ended Musharraf's political dominance and marked a critical democratic transition as the military-backed presidency lost its civilian legitimacy. For the first time since 1988, civilian parties regained broad-based authority, initiating a new era of political competition and coalition governance.

The 2013 general elections further strengthened Pakistan's democratic continuity. A record 111 political parties and numerous independents contested the polls, reflecting growing political pluralism. The campaign was marked by sharp rivalry among the PML-N, PPP, and PTI, with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attempting to disrupt the process through violence and threats. The PML-N, led by Nawaz Sharif, focused on economic revival, infrastructure, and energy policy, while the PPP emphasized social protection and women's empowerment. The PTI, under Imran Khan, mobilized youth with a populist reform agenda centered on justice and accountability. The PML-N emerged as the largest party with 126 seats and 35 percent of the vote, followed by PPP with 32 seats and PTI with 28. Voter turnout rose by 11 percent over 2008 levels, signaling renewed faith in democratic participation. The peaceful transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another represented a milestone in Pakistan's democratic evolution, underscoring the consolidation of electoral legitimacy after decades of military intervention.

Table: Comparative Results of the 2002 and 2013 General Elections in Pakistan

S.No	Political Party	2002: Seats Won	2002: Vote %	2013: Seats Won	2013: Vote %
1	PML-Q	78	25.7%	2	1.2%
2	PPP / PPPP	63	25.9%	31	15.7%
3	MMA	45	11.4%	—	—
4	PML-N	15	11.7%	124	32.0%
5	MQM	13	3.2%	18	5.6%
6	National Alliance (NA)	13	4.8%	—	—
7	ANP	—	—	1	1.0%
8	PML-F	4	1.1%	5	2.2%
9	PTI	1	0.8%	27	17.8%
10	Independents	29	9.0%	29	14.0%
—	Total Seats	274	100%	262	100%

3. Discussion

Populism in Pakistan has been both a product of and a reaction to institutional weaknesses. It has served as a mechanism for mass mobilization in times of political alienation but has also deepened polarization and undermined state institutions. While populism democratizes participation by giving voice to marginalized groups, it tends to revolve around charismatic leadership and personal loyalty. The absence of ideological depth and reliance on emotional appeals often results in policy inconsistency. Thus, Pakistan's populism oscillates between progressive reformism and reactionary nationalism, reflecting the contradictions inherent in its political culture. The evolution of electoral politics in Pakistan reveals a complex interplay

between populist leadership, institutional weakness, and public aspirations for democracy. From the controlled elections of the Ayub era to the populist movements of Bhutto and Benazir, every phase has reflected a deep tension between authoritarian control and popular resistance. Populism has repeatedly served as a mobilizing force, giving ordinary citizens a sense of political participation. However, it has also personalized power, undermining institutional maturity. The frequent intervention of the military and the manipulation of electoral laws disrupted the continuity of democratic growth. Despite this, the persistence of electoral participation demonstrates a resilient public commitment to democratic ideals. By the early 21st century, political pluralism and voter engagement had increased, signaling a gradual transformation in Pakistan's political culture.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of Pakistan's electoral politics illustrates a persistent tension between populist aspirations and institutional consolidation. From Fatima Jinnah's moral populism to Imran Khan's anti-elite narrative, every populist wave has carried both hope and risk. Populism has expanded the democratic imagination by empowering ordinary citizens but has also eroded governance structures by promoting personalized rule. A sustainable democracy in Pakistan requires balancing popular legitimacy with institutional stability, strengthening the Election Commission, promoting political education, and ensuring inclusivity. Only through accountable governance and civic engagement can Pakistan transform populism from a transient movement into a constructive democratic force.

The historical journey of Pakistan's electoral politics shows that while democracy has often been derailed, it has never been destroyed. Populist leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, and Imran Khan transformed political discourse by appealing directly to the people. Yet, this populism often came at the expense of strong institutions and collective governance. The restoration of democratic rule after 2008 and the peaceful power transition in 2013 symbolize the nation's growing democratic maturity. To sustain this progress, Pakistan must institutionalize electoral reforms, uphold transparency, and prevent populist excesses from destabilizing governance. Strengthening parliament, judiciary, and the Election Commission remains essential for protecting democracy from authoritarian relapse and ensuring that populism serves people, not power.

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