

Populism and Political Polarization: Cross-National Comparison of Populist Politics

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Abstract

Populism and polarization are interlinked phenomena that have transformed the global political landscape by manifesting divisive and conflictive rhetoric, leading them to undermine democratic institutions. This paper underscores the need to address the root causes such as economic grievances, identity politics, and ideological division that have precarious impacts on societies. This research seeks to uncover these common patterns and divergent outcomes and argues that personification, media environment, and economic strengths critically influence how populism and polarization unfold in different countries. This paper argues populism inherently fosters political polarization by deepening divisions in society. This is a qualitative interpretative research study that uses exploratory and explanatory research designs. The theoretical framework incorporates theories of populism, political polarization, media and communication, and social constructivism. This paper recommends fostering inclusive political dialogue, addressing the root cause, and promoting media literacy are essential steps towards reducing and mitigating polarization and strengthening democratic institutions.

Keywords: Populists, Populism, Political Polarization, Constructivism, Ideology, Democracy

Introduction

The rise of populism by promoting divisive rhetoric has significantly contributed to political polarization and undermines democratic norms. Populism and polarization have driven a new low for global democracy. The rise of ultra-populist leaders has much to do with democratic regression—the changing dynamics of the democratic decline witness far-right populist connection with political polarization. These leaders act with impunity to suppress freedom, erode civil liberties, curb dissent voices, and overlook any checks and balances system that holds the government accountable. These elected populists have a vital impact on political polarization through media and civil society organizations. Therefore, this paper argues populism inherently fosters political polarization by deepening divisions in society. The rise of populism contributes to exploiting societal grievances and threatens social cohesion and democratic stability. This research investigates the loopholes in the democratic system through which populism thrives and damages democracy. This research compares four case studies as empirical evidence such as Turkey, Hungary, USA, and Pakistan. This article aims to simplify the populist features of modern populist parties by analyzing the populist political personalities. The policies of each leader are mapped to distinguish populist similarities, despite their ideological disparity and differences. Populist politics show similar tendencies under different international orders. This research seeks to uncover these common patterns and divergent outcomes and argues that personification, media environment, and economic strengths critically influence how populism and polarization unfold in different countries. This research uses the methodology of qualitative research by using the method of empirical analysis, and descriptive and interpretive approaches. For theoretical understanding and interpretation, this research implements populism theory,

political polarization theory, media and communication theory, and the theory of social constructivism. The objectives are to identify common patterns, analyze divergent outcomes, case study examinations, and develop mitigation strategies. This research will answer the question: How do Populists utilize rhetoric and media to fuel political polarization in civil societies for their gain? What strategies does cross-national comparison suggest to address the challenges posed by populism and polarization? Pakistan has also seen democratic regression like many other countries in recent years. Therefore, this research covers the gap because no literature is available on populists' politics and policies.

Now, this paper defines the terms populism and political polarization. Populism is a collective effort to gain power and a way of politics that can take various forms (Mouffe, 2016). Arditì defines it as a parasite detrimental to democracy due to its peculiar activism (Arditì, 2007). On the contrary, political polarization is the increasing ideological differences and conflict between political parties within a society (Prior, 2013). It manifests division and hostility between opposing political groups. The coming section discusses the literature review.

Literature Review

This section discusses the literature review on populism and political polarization through a cross-national comparison and examines the intersection of these phenomena focusing on the response to populist rhetoric that results in political polarization.

Lodhi reveals that the outlook of democracy has become cloudy and already under threat across the world facing challenges from polarization, intolerance, and toxic politics with the resurgence of ultra-nationalist populist leaders (Lodhi, 2024). Democracy regression is a worldwide phenomenon recorded by various organizations such as Swedish V-Dem institutes Democracy Report 2024 records a decline in democracy and a massive rise in the wave of autocratization (Lodhi, 2024; Nord et al., 2024).

In the USA, the rise of Donald Trump is driven by his divisive rhetoric on immigration and trade marked intense polarization that exacerbates political polarization (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Trump adopts modern tools such as social media to bypass traditional channels further polarizing public opinion. Trump bypasses traditional media lenses and direct communication via social media to inculcate polarized rhetoric (Sides & Vavreck, 2018). According to Intrabartola, Trump targeted the mainstream media bias and worked to discredit journalists. Trump's stance on 'fake news' caused large numbers to lose interest in the media. She argues that pro-Trump media outlets propagated his presidency by presenting alternative facts to the public (Intrabartola, 2021). Tubbs points out that Trump's claim of fake news diminishing media trust (Tubbs, 2019).

The post-communist transition period shifted Hungary towards populism. This transition created economic and political uncertainties setting the stage for populist movements (Bozoki, 2011). In Hungary, the leadership of Viktor Orban showcases his anti-immigration stance and emphasis on national sovereignty to polarize Hungarian society. He undermines the judiciary and controls media outlets to maintain his populist agenda (Enyedi, 2016). Rooduijn and Akkerman argue that this cross-national comparison reveals that populism follows common patterns and unique national contexts to manifest polarization. Trump's anti-media rhetoric and Viktor's pro-media policy influence the nature of political discourse and polarization (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Kornai elaborates those economic grievances inequalities, unemployment rate, and inflation have fueled populist sentiments (Kornai, 2015). Viktor targets the establishment and

political elite accusing them of being unfamiliar with the real Hungarian people manifesting strong nationalist and anti-elite rhetoric (Enyedi, 2016). Pirro argues that Viktor's divisive rhetoric and policies have intensified social and political polarization in Hungary (Pirro, 2018).

Turkey has seen a populism landscape with the rise of Tayyab Erdogan. Yavuz mentions that Erdogan presents himself as a champion of the marginalized and a critique of the secular elite attracted enormous voters (Yavuz, 2009). Onis argues that economic instability plays a vital role in the rise of populism in Turkey (Onis, 2011). Levitsky and Loxton argue that populism hurts democracy by analyzing the case of Turkey revealing that Turkey is a mid-level income country that represents a critical challenge to globalization (Levitsky & Loxton, 2015). Turkish populism's central focus is Erdogan's charismatic leadership and ability to connect with the masses and present himself as a strong leader (Tepe, 2012). Erdogan connects nationalism with the religious identity that appeals to conservative religious sentiments and has been a key strategy in the consolidation of power and a division of secular and liberal opposition (Yilmaz, 2021). Esser elaborates that Erdogan controls the media and uses it for a propaganda purpose a significant aspect of Turkish populism (Esser et al., 2017). Erdogan populism also aggravated social and political polarization in Turkey's divisive rhetoric deepened political cleavages and created a conflictive environment. This populism also reveals that the democracy level has seen a massive decline in Turkey and transformed into authoritarianism.

Zaheer mentions that populism is a concept that prioritizes the needs and interests of common people and an anti-elite movement (Zaheer, 2023). Pakistan is a unique case study of populism and political polarization and has a history of populism with populist leaders appealing to the common people from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Imran Khan. This new wave of populism in Pakistan was introduced by Imran Khan's charismatic and celebrity status personality and played a vital role in his success (Zaheer, 2023). Imran blatantly challenges the opposition by questioning the establishment role in politics, and mandate to reform political institutions. Shafqat points out that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Imran Khan's anti-corruption and institutional reform rhetoric hailed by significant followers equipped them with polarized radical narratives (Shafqat, 2018). Gidron and Hall elaborate factors that economic conditions such as rising inequality and economic crises provide fertile ground for populist movements (Gidron & Hall, 2017). Therefore, Imran Khan criticized Western imperialism and globalization. He introduced free and fair relations with other countries, equality in decision-making, and independent policy strategies (Mansab, 2023). Ahmed argues that Imran Khan's radical rhetoric damages the democracy in Pakistan. He believes that only a democratic system can save Pakistan from plunging into darkness. Therefore, all political parties need to come to the table to talk to resolve national and personal conflicts to alleviate political crises (Ahmed, 2023). Imran Khan's political narrative is based on authoritarianism, tarnishing the opposition, and slums of corrupt elite and misfeasance establishment. This extreme rhetoric exacerbated the social and political radicalization. Imran Khan's fixated rhetoric on corruption created hysteria among his supporters, personifying him as the savior of Pakistan's political system. Trump and Imran Khan capitalized on economic disparities to garner support. Other factors such as institutional strength by mentioning checks and balances affect the democratic institutions and alter the political landscapes to extend the populism in the country (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Research Methods

This is a comparative qualitative interpretative research study that uses the exploratory and explanatory research design. The theoretical framework of this research includes several theories such as populism, political radicalization, media and communication, and social

constructivism theory. These theories provide enough insights to understand the phenomena of populism and political radicalization in different countries and reveal their impacts on democracy.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework discusses several theories that help to systematically analyze the causes, manifestations, and consequences in different political environments and national contexts and investigates the comparison of populism and polarization. This theoretical framework entails populism theory, political polarization theory, media and communication theory, and constructivism theory.

1. Populism Theory

Mudde defines populism as an ideology that believes the society is divided into two groups, 'the pure people' against 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2004). Mudde explains three core concepts of populism: the people, the elite, and the general will. He argues that populism believes that general will should be the expression of politics (Mudde, 2017). Laclau extends the debate by describing the characteristics of populism such as charismatic leadership, anti-establishment rhetoric, and slams of the general will (Laclau, 2005).

Weyland defines populism as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks to exercise government power. Personalistic leader power is based on direct support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. According to him, the supporters believe these leaders avoid ideological radicalism and make political decisions through strategies and simple calculations (Weyland, 2017). Kaltwasser gives three dimensions to investigate the character of populism: material, political, and symbolic. The material dimension reveals the distribution of economic resources to the specific group of society. It means that material inclusion or exclusion of certain groups are promoted by populist leaders. The political dimension identifies whether populist leadership prevents certain groups from political participation. The symbolic dimension examines the boundaries between people vs elite and explains how these terms are exclusive or inclusive according to the populist rhetoric (Kaltwasser, 2013). The populism approach considers having a powerful individual or leader who craves his autonomy and dominates other political actors. Ostiguy describes populism as a two-way phenomenon among political leaders and their supporters. Ostiguy extends the debate and mentions that socio-cultural and politico-cultural content mobilize the politics of personalistic leaders (Ostiguy, 2017).

Key Concepts of Populism Theory

- People vs Elite
- Charismatic leadership
- Anti-pluralism

Kyle & Gultchin describe three frames to understand the relationship between the people, the elite, and populist leaders such as cultural, socio-economic, and anti-establishment. Cultural populism reveals the division based on identity politics between the people and the elite. They elaborate that cultural populism believes that the native part of the society belongs to true people and the other part is a threat to the nation. Kyle & Gultchin gave examples of Hungary under Victor Orban and Turkey under Erdogan. The second frame, socio-economic populism divides society into economic classes and draws 'us' and 'them'. Here, us means people as allies, and them means elites as outsiders. Donald Trump of the USA and Imran Khan of Pakistan adopted this type of populism during their political campaign. The third frame anti-establishment divides the working class and the ruling elite (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). They consider the elite an enemy and aim to mitigate corruption, malfeasance, and misfeasance. Pakistan under Imran Khan and

Italy under the Five Star Movement are the prime example of this type of populism. Populism plays a vital role in political radicalization transferring society from meek ideas to ham-fist extreme

narratives and evoke hysteria among their supporters.

2. Political Polarization Theory

According to Iyengar, political polarization is a phenomenon that manifests ideological distance and hostility between different political parties and their supporters (Iyengar et al., 2012). Political polarization is a growing ideological divide and mutual animosity between political groups that manifests an effective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Political polarization means individual emotions towards opposing parties become direly negative. McCarty describes it as stark differences in policy preferences manifest radical narratives towards rival ideologies (McCarty et al., 2006). Tucker points out that social media platforms aggravate populism, create an echo that reinforces existing beliefs, and spread populist rhetoric that exacerbates polarization (Tucker et al., 2018). Prior extends the debate arguing that media plays an enormous role in populism and polarization. He explains that media platforms simplify populist messages and frame political discourse in polarized themes (Prior, 2007). Sunstein argues that media outlets create resonance and foster divisive rhetoric (Sunstein, 2001).

Key Concepts of Political Polarization Theory

- Affective polarization
- Identity politics
- Issue polarization

Populism leadership aligns preferences with social identities such as race, religion, and geography, maintains its relationship through mutual dislike and distrust between supporters of different political parties, and policy trajectory evolves issues such as immigration, economic inequality, and climate change.

3. Media and Communication Theory

Media and communication theories play a vital role in shaping public opinion and political behavior. This theory explores the role of media outlets and different media tools and how media tools influence public opinion, mobilize populist's support, and aggravate political polarization. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory argues that media does not tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Media outlets focus on certain issues to influence the public agenda and divert attention from some issues. Media and communication theory adopts framing as a tool to emphasize specific aspects of an issue, thereby shaping public perception. This tool suggests that the way information is presented influences how the audience understands and interprets that information (Entman, 1993). Sunstein suggests that media outlets create resonance chambers where users are exposed primarily to information and intensify political polarization by limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and creating a more divided public (Sunstein, 2001).

Key concepts of Media and communication theory

- Media framing
- Echo chambers
- Agenda setting

This cross-national comparison reveals that the rise of Donald Trump in the USA is a result of agenda-setting and framing theories on social media opposing the traditional media setting. Trump directly communicates with the public via Twitter allowing him to set the agenda and frame issues in ways that are more suited to him amplifying populist messages and deepening the

political divide (Sides & Vavreck, 2018). Viktor of Hungary controlled the media during his political campaign which allowed him to effectively set the public agenda and frame political issues. Imran Khan in Pakistan also uses the same media technique to address the mandate and frame the opposition as an enemy. Populism benefited most from the media and communication strategies that helped them to intensify rhetoric and flourish political polarization.

4. Theory of social constructivism

Populism and social constructivism are two concepts that offer deep insights into how political identities and realities are constructed. Social constructivism claims that everything is socially constructed (Wendt, 1999; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructivism focuses on the role of norms and values in shaping political behavior and perceptions. Constructivism is an ontology rather than a theory. Constructivism is a set of assumptions and norms about the world. It is a set of human inspiration, agency, and intervention. The variables of interests like trade relations, military power, worldwide institutions, or national interests are less significant in constructivist accounts, as constructivists have interests in truths of the world because they have some socio-cultural and socially built connotations (Wendt, 2000). Theoretically, Constructivism means information is constructed from a composite of history, norms, ideas, and beliefs and the scholars must understand it when they explain the behavior of the state (Wendt, 1999). Norris and Inglehart explain media environment is another factor that influences the spread of populist rhetoric and political polarization (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Key themes of social constructivism theory

- Identity construction
- Propaganda
- Norms and values
- Discourse and mobilization

Populism theory constructs a binary opposition through a constructivist lens between ‘the real people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ via media framing and discourses. This construction helps the populists to mobilize support and organize animosity towards other political groups. Populism chooses to propagate its agenda by constructing perceptions and opinions. Social constructivism initiates rhetoric to oppose and reject other political views as alien and foreign intervention in their established socio-cultural values. The cross-national comparison reveals that Trump’s populist narrative constructed a binary between people and a corrupt establishment. This division includes external threats like foreign competitors and immigrants. This construction attracted those voters who felt marginalized by economic change and globalization (Oliver & Rahn, 2016). In the case of Hungary, Viktor also constructs a populist identity centered on Hungarian nationalism and sovereignty. PTI used populist discourse to construct a narrative of anti-corruption, and political reforms, and Imran Khan framed opposition as an enemy to gain support from citizens frustrated by economic and political instability.

Populism VS Political Polarization: An Analysis

According to Urbinati, populism is a new form of mixed government that competes with constitutional democracy and the population achieves power over the others. He explains that it is a kind of democracy based on the direct relationship between the leader and the people (Urbinati, 2019). Populism can appeal to the masses for collective gains, change the established political system, provide a platform for addressing grievances of marginalized communities, and pose a direct threat to democratic governance and economic stability. Populism is a process that constructs perceptions of the masses and divides them into factions that pave the way toward

political polarization. Political polarization is a division of ideology that goes to extremes. Populism and political polarization are interlinked and interdependent because the first is the reason and the second is the cause. Political polarization has different aspects such as ideological polarization and effective polarization. These are concepts and terminologies (Prior, 2013; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015):

- Bipartisanship: It's a cooperation between two opposing political groups
- Partisanship: It's a strong allegiance to one's political party
- Gridlock: It refers to a situation when there is no progress due to intense partisan conflict
- Political Spectrum: It is a system to classify different political positions concerning other

Hetherington discusses various causes of political polarization such as media fragmentation including social media, economic instability and inequality, cultural and identity differences, and party strategies (Hetherington, 2005). It has dire and precarious impacts on democracy, governance, social division, policy volatility, and decreased political participation as well as intensifies the political environment with divisive rhetoric and radical propaganda.

Political Polarization: Causes and Impacts

As discussed above, political polarization defines the extreme ideological distances and intensification of political behavior leading to a divided society. The causes of political polarization are (Putnam and Campbell, 2012; Fukuyama, 2018; Mutz, 2018; Mudde, 2019; Parker et al., 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019):

- Party polarization and political realignment
- Economic inequality, populism, and nationalism
- Media fragmentation
- Religion and secularism
- Polarized political elite and rise of identity politics
- Partisan gerrymandering and generational differences
- Ideological differences and psychological factors
- Social identity and cultural changes

Ironically, Political polarization's adverse implications destabilize the established political structure and exacerbate political radicalization. Unfortunately, these phenomena have wide-ranging impacts such as:

- Polarization contributes to political instability and conflict, undermines democratic government, and leads to legislative gridlock by dividing the society into opposite factions (Svolik, 2019).
- Polarization destabilizes social cohesion and trust by aggravating division in political, ethnic, and religious values through misinformation.
- Polarization significantly leads to economic uncertainty resulting in economic disparities, market uncertainty, and affecting investor confidence.
- Populists adopt media platforms to inculcate thoughts enabling them to spread partisan content and misinformation that leads to extremism.
- Polarized governments struggle to maintain foreign relations because it affects international relations and weakens global cooperation.
- Increased political violence and social unrest

Political polarization's detrimental effects lead to conflict and division within society that pave the way toward devastating outcomes and skirmish ideologies. Therefore, a rigorous effort is required to promote dialogue and strengthen democratic institutions to mitigate the impacts of polarization in society.

Populism and Political Polarization: A cross-national Comparison

Polarization is the consistent effect of populism, disturbing democratic norms, and threatening social cohesion in society. Populism is characterized by its anti-elite agenda and appeal to the people framing political discourse in binary terms. Populist leaders simplify complex issues into a struggle between the 'people' and the 'elite'.

❖ US Democracy and Donald Trump

Roberts argues that Trump introduced ideological polarization and served as a political vessel and force multiplier for polarizing tendencies. Trump captured the traditional party and transformed it into an instrument of his insurgent political populist project and opposed the US party establishment. Trump fueled the public with his racial slogans and anti-foreign rhetoric weakening the democratic norms in the USA (Robert, 2022). Populist polarization is a two-edged sword for democracy which means it has the potential to broaden and invigorate democratic representation by giving space to the marginalized and neglected parties. When populism aligns representation on the issue, it may be healthy for democracy because it makes the party system more responsive. Polarization acquires a self-reinforcing quality that makes it pernicious for democracy. Populism is a conflict of 'we' VS 'them' that aims to incorporate neglected voices and people in decision-making. Trump's racial and anti-media campaign jeopardizes the US democratic institutions. Trump's jingoistic rhetoric intensifies political radicalization and transforms public opinion and perceptions. The autocratic modus-operandi of populism targets liberal democracy and expresses interest in popular sovereignty. Fukuyama mentions that the 2020 election is a stark example of the detrimental impact of political polarization in countries (Fukuyama, 2020). Oliver and Rahn mention that Trump's populist rhetoric is a battle between people who were left behind by globalization and corrupt elite policies.

❖ Viktor Obran and the Hungary

Like Trump, Viktor's populist stance significantly contributed to political polarization by undermining democratic norms and capitalizing on social grievances. Viktor's authoritarian personality resulted in social division and democratic backsliding. Bogaards mentions that under Viktor's rule opposition parties and civil society organizations struggled to operate freely (Bogaards, 2018). Fukuyama argues that Viktor's populist led to increased social fragmentation and legislative deadlock. Scheppele elaborates that Viktor has systematically dismantled democratic checks and balances by amending the Constitution. Viktor's authoritative approach led him to control the media, weaken the judiciary, and consolidate power, polarizing the landscape by silencing the oppositional voices (Scheppele, 2013). Viktor's populist rhetoric addresses economic inequalities by emphasizing nationalist and protectionist economic policies and criticizes the immigrant policies arguing that Hungary has diverted attention from national and domestic issues (Kornai, 2015). Viktor's nationalist rhetoric fueled political polarization in the public resulting in extreme nationalist ideology and increased animosity towards opposing groups.

❖ Tayyab Erdogan and Turkey

This comparison explicitly reveals that political polarization has become a critical issue disturbing democratic norms and social cohesion. Erdogan's populist rhetoric includes economic reforms, religious sentiments, and insurgency against the secular elite complying with the majority to follow His populist stance. The drivers of Erdogan's populist rhetoric are economic instability, identity politics and nationalism, authoritarian and political repression, and external factors influencing politics in Turkey (Yavuz, 2001; Aras, 2016; Esposito & Yilmaz, 2019). The consequences of political radicalization in Turkey resulted in democracy decline, and social polarization, and impacted regional and international relations. Comparatively, Erdogan's populist rhetoric entails the values of religious sentiments and opposes liberal and secular ideologies. Erdogan's party originates from Islamic movements that orchestrated the political field against military and secular powers. Somehow, Erdogan was able to dismantle democratic elements in Turkey and not accept the principles of liberalism (Massicard, 2021). Castaldo concludes that the Turkish political landscape transformed from tutelary democracy to competitive authoritarianism in 2010. His analysis reveals that several conditions led to the emergence of populism in Turkey such as the economic crisis and the collapse of the Turkish party system were two of them. The other reason that motivated Erdogan to acquire unchecked control over state machinery and deploy it against all opposition was to override the veto powers of the establishment to fulfill his electoral promises. In a nutshell, the interaction of populism with a set of facilitating conditions represents an effective catalyst for the rise of competitive authoritarianism in Turkey.

❖ **Unravelling Populism's Past in Pakistan**

Populism has gained enormous attention in recent times and become a significant political force across the world including in Pakistan. Pakistan has a history of populism dating back to its inception, Liaqat Ali Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Imran Khan. Pakistani government drives its power not only from the masses but from state institutions making it a hybrid regime. This section examines the interplay between power structures and governance systems and unravels the complexities of populism in a hybrid regime. This hybrid regime is a recurring phenomenon in Pakistan because influential groups exert significant influence which leads them to manipulate state institutions and control resources for personal gains. This modus-operandi undermines democratic norms and certain factions consolidate power (Tunio & Nabi, 2021). Pakistani populism often manifests through charismatic leaders who promise to fight corruption and reject the intervention of political elites. The causes of political polarization in Pakistan are economic inequality, ethnic and regional tensions, military influence, media fragmentation, and populist rhetoric. Pakistani populist leadership from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Imran Khan blatantly opposes institutional intervention in politics and criticizes the economic disparities (Akhtar, 2018). These factors of polarization impacts have precarious impacts on governance challenges, economic uncertainty, social division, and democracy backsliding in Pakistan. Fiaz argues that Populist leader used anti-establishment rhetoric concentrated power in their own hands in Pakistan appealed to nationalism undermined the freedom of institutions and utilized resources for their own goals. Pakistani populists used to control media, manipulate facts, suppress dissent, and adopt the policy of propaganda for perception building.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf: Imran Khan's Populist Movement

Imran Khan started the new wave of populism in Pakistan with the anti-establishment rhetoric. PTI presented himself as a voice of the people and promised to drive out the corrupt elite and alleged foreign interventions. Imran Khan used anti-western and religious cards for

their political numbers. Imran Khan introduced the concept of accountability and transparency to eliminate traditional political dynasties and corrupt politicians. Imran introduced a new form of religious populism in mainstream politics under the guise of human rights. Imran Khan's 'New Pakistan' slogan appealed to the public as a reformist and religious savior because this new Pakistan was based on Islamic infrastructure known as 'Riast-e-Madina'. The main points of Imran Khan's populist rhetoric are:

1. Anti-establishment
2. Riast-e-Madina
3. New Pakistan (Naya Pakistan)
4. Critique of Traditional Parties
5. Nationalism and Patriotism
6. Human Rights
7. Economic stability

These factors appealed to the masses and led to political polarization in Pakistan. Imran's divisive rhetoric increased ideological tension between other political parties. This division based on radical and menacing opinions aggravated the animosity between non-political and democratic institutions which impacted negatively by imposing restrictions and violating human rights in Pakistan. This conflictive rhetoric intensifies ideological fracas and polarized political and civil-military relations. Khan's conformational style has deepened political polarization in Pakistan and created significant challenges for political unity and stability.

Discussion and Analysis

This cross-national comparison reveals various aspects and characteristics of how political polarization manifests in the US, Hungary, Turkey, and Pakistan. The populists in the US were influenced through ideological division, affective polarization, and media influence. On the contrary, Hungary's populist characteristics are authoritarian tendencies, media control, and nationalism. In Turkey, populist rhetoric entails an anti-secular agenda and inclusion of Islamic values, and in Pakistan, apart from the above, populist advocates address civil-military relations and sectarian divide. Almost every nation has a common cause such as economic inequality, cultural wars, external influence, and establishment intervention in the politics of political polarization. Therefore, it has dire impacts such as in the US, Hungary, and Turkey, it creates governance challenges, social division, and democratic backsliding. Political polarization curbs freedom and exploits civil liberties. In Pakistan, it violates democratic norms and divides the society into factions. In the US and Hungary, it reduced trust in institutions and democratic backsliding. But in Turkey and Pakistan, it resulted in the erosion of civil liberties, political violence, and governance instability paving the way to military intervention in the form of martial law. More commonly, populist governments attempt to control media and manipulate facts to divert attention from major issues to minor issues. They seek to fend for civil liberties and ban opposing voices from using force. Political polarization creates a violent environment that shifts the political landscape from moderate values to radicalized ideologies. Populist leadership with the help of exaggeration tries to influence the social and political perceptions of the masses and gains their support. The rise of populism appealing the sentiments of nationalism in the US and Hungary, and religious and anti-secular sentiments in Turkey and Pakistan. Khan's authoritative style of politics disturbed the established political structure and deepened political polarization by creating enormous challenges for political and economic stability in Pakistan.

In a nutshell, to mitigate the impacts of polarization requires efforts such as:

- Strengthen democratic institutions, promote dialogue, and social cohesion
- Promote civic education and media literacy programs
- Social media regulations and community-building initiatives
- Ensure economic equality and encourage cross-partisan engagement
- A balance between religion and secularism

Conclusion

This comparison of cross-national populism and political polarization reveals that each country exhibits unique characteristics based on socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts. This paper argues that the common indicators of populism in these countries are anti-establishment rhetoric, the use and role of media, nationalism and identity politics, and economic grievances. In Turkey and Pakistan apart from the above, religion and anti-secular and liberal sentiments are used to promote populism. Political polarization has detrimental impacts on democratic societies because it fuels authoritarian regimes, increases ideological differences, and polarizes political relations between political parties. In Pakistan, political polarization has led to democratic gridlock and decline, in Turkey it violated civil liberties, and in Hungary, it has polarized the political landscape. This paper recommends fosters inclusive political dialogue, addressing root cause, and promotes media literacy are essential steps towards reducing and mitigating polarization and strengthen democratic institutions.

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