

## Rhetoric of a Populist in Power: An Exploration of the Construction of Identities in Imran Khan's Political Imaginary (2018-2022)



Muhammad Shahab ud Din	Lecturer, Department of History and Politics, The University of Haripur, Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. <a href="mailto:shahab.sb7@gmail.com">shahab.sb7@gmail.com</a>
Dr. Waqar Ilahi	Visiting Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Punjab. <a href="mailto:wagarsalarzee@gmail.com">wagarsalarzee@gmail.com</a>
Dr. Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan	Visiting Lecturer, School of Integrated Social Sciences, University of Lahore, Punjab. <a href="mailto:ehaisham.850@gmail.com">ehaisham.850@gmail.com</a>

**Abstract:** *Imran Khan, former Prime Minister of Pakistan (2018-2022), has been hailed by many as a populist leader. This made it compulsory to apply a theory of populism on his political personality. For this purpose, Jan Werner Müller's theory of populism was employed. 10 speeches of different kinds given by Khan while he was in power were selected for discourse analysis. For discourse analysis, Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) was used. It was found that Khan considers the society to be ultimately divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups (the real people and the corrupt elite) based on moral legitimacy and illegitimacy. It is noteworthy that, in Khan's political worldview, these social divisions extend beyond individual entities such as himself, the general populace, or fellow politicians, as institutions also undergo dynamic shifts in it over time. For asserting extreme antagonism between these two social camps, Khan mostly uses superlative language. It was found that Khan emphasizes more on his imagined moral legitimacy to power rather than empirical legitimacy.*

**Keywords:** Populism, discourse, homogenous, antagonistic, moral legitimacy, empirical legitimacy

### Introduction

Imran Khan, a cricketer turned politician, founded Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) in 1996. Despite initial setbacks, PTI gained momentum in 2011 with Khan leading massive rallies and attracting leaders from other parties. In the 2013 General Elections, PTI became the second-largest party, forming a provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. During opposition, Khan mobilized against alleged election rigging and corruption, notably with the 2014 Azadi March. In 2018, PTI won the General Elections, making Khan the Prime Minister. His tenure ended on April 10, 2022, following a Vote of No Confidence (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). Apart from

pursuing a political career after retirement from Cricket, Khan also devoted himself to philanthropy. He embarked on a mission to gather contributions to establish the nation's inaugural state-of-the-art cancer hospital, honoring his late mother, Shaukat Khanum, who succumbed to cancer (Latif & Sajid, 2022). Khan is widely characterized as a populist leader by journalists, politicians, academics, and others. This prompted an examination of Khan's personality through the lens of Jan-Werner Müller's theory of populism.

There is a growing interest in academic work on populism in Pakistan where Imran Khan has been viewed by many as a populist leader, but from the review of literature it was found that

there has been no academic work on how Khan is a populist leader according to the political theory of populism. These studies apriori considered Khan a populist leader and then added description of his political rhetoric and actions. To share some glimpses, Khalid in his study applied Zulianello's theory of populism on Khan and found that there is ideological cluelessness in his political rhetoric (Khalid, 2020). Yilmaz and Saleem, in their study pointed that Khan uses religion in his populist political appeal (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2021). In another study, Yilmaz and Saleem found that digital authoritarianism had increased in the populist government of PTI (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022).

The ideological cluelessness, use of religion for political gains, and digital authoritarianism can be found in other political parties or the governments as well. As D'Eramo puts it, "the term populism is still employed polemically much more than analytically, often to brand and stigmatize political movements and leaders" (D'Eramo, 2013). This is the research gap that this study intends to fill out.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Müller, "although we simply do not have anything like the theory of populism, the political theorists can profit from its endogenous link with democracy, whose normative foundations and procedures are very familiar to us" (Müller, 2012, p. 19-29). After all the peculiarity in the quest for a unified definition of populism, there now exists some basic agreement about the rhetorical character and the strategies a populist employ for coming into power (Urbinati 2020). Many scholars of populism agree on the point that populist political eye contains two subsets of people in which one is celebrated while the other is degraded. As Cass Mudde defines populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups...and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to Nadia Urbinati, "populism consists in a transmutation of the democratic principles of the majority and the people in a

way that is meant to celebrate one subset of the people as opposed to another, through a leader embodying it and an audience legitimizing it" (Urbinati, 2020).

Müller defines populism in a moralistic political perspective that envisions a morally pure and unified, albeit fictional, people pitted against corrupt elites. In Müller's view, criticizing elites alone is insufficient for populism; it must also reject pluralism through claiming exclusive representation of the people. Populists deny the legitimacy of political rivals, portraying them as part of the corrupt elite. This core populist claim necessitates the exclusion of those not aligned with populist parties from the idealized, morally pure people (Müller, 2016, p. 19-20). The problem with populism is its iteration on the moral legitimacy of a leader to power. As according to Riker, in the modern representative democracy no one has the moral legitimacy to power. There is a tenure system where incumbent leader has to leave after spending allotted time in power. Necessitating the moral legitimacy of a leader necessarily de-legitimizes all other leaders to run for power or remain in power (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 31-72). The effects of this trend in populism does not stay within the power circles of the state but it flows down to the society in its extreme level, wherein a certain group of people who associate themselves to the populist leaders are busy in morally delegitimizing citizens who do not support the populist leader.

Looking at Müller's definition, it can be noticed that the definition of populism revolves around the question of identity i.e., the way a populist leader portrays his identity, the way a populist leader portrays the identity of the political landscape as a whole and multiple identities within it.

### **Methodology**

Language serves as the primary means for identity construction in social and political settings. Fairclough emphasizes that "the identity of a speaker is expressed in the linguistic forms and meaning she chooses". Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) considers both written and spoken discourse as forms of social practice, with language users engage in actions

such as identity construction (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258-284).

The methodology used in this research is qualitative discourse analysis through Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). The DHA project, originating in Vienna, is a political discourse paradigm with a focus on connecting various genres and discourses related to an issue, incorporating its historical dimension. Core dimensions in DHA include the content of the data, discursive strategies, and linguistic realization. The approach addresses three types of critiques: text or discourse immanent critique, socio-diagnostic critique, and prognostic critique. Utilizing the principle of triangulation, DHA exhibits flexibility by accommodating various multi-methodological approaches and empirical data. A key concept, "Topos," (Plural Topoi) involves the argumentative theory, emphasizing premises explicitly or implicitly used in arguments (Wodak, 1994; Wodak, 2015; Žagar, 2010). This study examines ten speeches which Imran Khan gave in his tenure in different settings, encompassing addresses to political workers, the nation, and international organizations, fulfilling the research question's requirements. The selected speeches exhibit characteristics such as length, volume, metaphorical usage, repetitiveness, and deliberative style in line with DHA principles. The titles of the speeches are as follows:

- 1) Election Winning Speech on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2018.
- 2) Speech to the Tiger Force on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2020.
- 3) Speech in the Official Ceremony of Celebrating Independence of Gilgit Baltistan on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.
- 4) Speech after losing Capital Seat in Senate Elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2021.
- 5) Speech after taking Vote of Confidence on

6<sup>th</sup> March, 2021.

- 6) Imran Khan Speech on the Inauguration of Hazara Motorway, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2020.
- 7) Speech to PTI Gathering in GB on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.
- 8) Speech at the World Government Summit on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2019.
- 9) Speech at the Inaugural Session of 7th Asian Regional Conservative Forum of International Union for Conservation of Nature in Islamabad on 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2019.
- 10) Imran Khan's Last Speech as Prime Minister of Pakistan on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.

### **Research Findings and Discussions**

The research findings are discussed in the following headings.

#### **1) Identity of the Leader/Himself**

Political parties and governments have always used religion for political gains throughout the history of Pakistan (Zafar & Javaid, 2019). After the discourse analysis it was found that Khan also talked about religion in all the speeches to construct his identity of being a moral and religious political character, but he is not the only one to do it. Although, whether he does it more than other politicians is debatable. An example is, in a speech he said, "I am trained by Allah (God) to compete" (Khan, 2019).

The study tried to focus on other arguments that Khan use to construct his identity as the only leader in the country to have moral legitimacy to power. There are 27 different implicit and explicit topoi that are constantly employed by Khan for the construction of a morally legitimate identity of himself. Given the recurrence of certain arguments across multiple speeches, as well as within the same speech, each type of argument is addressed only once, in the following table.

Topoi of Moral Legitimacy Employed	Quoted examples from the Selected Speeches
1) <u>He did not enter politics for personal gains and could have easily lived luxurious life.</u> (Being a celebrity figure from a long time ago).	"I had everything before coming into politics. Politics gave me nothing. Nobody knew about them (his political opponents) at that time. They came to politics for personal gains while I came to politics because I saw my nation falling" (Khan, 2019).
2) <u>He originated from the people.</u>	"I was from outside; I was not from the political class" (Khan, 2019).
3) <u>He is the same age as that of Pakistan</u> (association with the state)	"I am almost the same age as Pakistan. I am the first generation of the Pakistanis who was born in Pakistan. I have witnessed development in the early Pakistan. Countries gave examples of Pakistan in terms of development. I have witnessed the Pakistan going up and down in terms of development. Therefore, I came to politics" (Khan, 2019).
4) <u>He witnessed and understands the rapid development in Pakistan followed by rapid downfall, so he knows the solution as well.</u>	
5) <u>People entrust him with charity but they do not give taxes to the politicians</u> (People have trust in him).	"When I went to the public to collect money, I realized that people are very generous and strong. Poorest of the people supported me. And I did what no one thought would happen, that from the public money I build the hospital (...) But we are at the lowest in giving taxes. And the reason was that people didn't trust the government. They thought that their taxes were spent on the lavish lifestyle of the ruling elite" (Khan, 2019).
6) <u>Only he is able to run the system as only he is able to collect money from the people and then spend it on them</u> (as collecting tax and spending it on the public good is the core function of the state).	
7) <u>He has the backing of rich overseas community</u> (they bring their money to Pakistan in the form of investments when he is in power).	"The biggest asset that we have is the overseas Pakistanis. Insh-Allah! (If God Wills) I will invite them to Pakistan. We will stabilize our governance system and will give them opportunity to invest in Pakistan" (Khan, 2018).
8) <u>He knows about the whole world</u> (as he visited many countries while being a cricketer).	"I spent a lot of my time abroad, I have witnessed the western countries, I have witnessed the political system in England" (Khan, 2021).
9) <u>He knows about the systems in developed countries</u> (he can bring that development here).	"I have seen all the best countries in terms of development" (Khan, 2019).
10) <u>He is a reader.</u>	"Another book is ghost wars; in this book it is said that Nawaz Shareef had said to the American Army to come to Pakistan and protect him from the Pakistani Army" (Khan, 2020).
11) <u>He is a writer.</u>	"When I wrote this book (written by Imran Khan, named 'Indus Journey'), it was when I left cricket and again started visiting the northern areas" (Khan, 2019).
12) <u>He is known to the West</u> (unlike all other politicians)	"If there is only one person who is known to West, it's me. Because I have been to the whole world" (Khan, 2022).
13) <u>The only leader with international profile.</u>	
14) <u>Indian media considers him a villain</u> (which implicitly means he is the hero of Pakistan)	"The Indian media present me as a Bollywood villain" (Khan, 2018).
15) <u>Leader with distinction</u> (already proved in cricket).	"When I first came to international cricket, Pakistan was the weakest in World Cricket (...) and by the time I left cricket, we were the world champions" (Khan, 2019).
16) <u>He is the one who can fight for the cause of Pakistan in international politics</u> (as he has already fought	"Listen to me carefully, I have fought a court case abroad (referring to England), against Ian Botham and I won the case (chants of the crowd)" (Khan, 2020).

cases in developed countries).	
17) <u>He struggled to rise in politics, unlike all others.</u>	“Unlike all others, I have done a 24-year struggle in politics just for Pakistan” (Khan, 2020).
18) <u>Knows Pakistan more than any other politician.</u>	“Probably! I am a person who knows Pakistan more than anyone else. I have been to every nook and corner of the country” (Khan, 2021).
19) <u>He is the one who can bring transparent voting system in Pakistan</u> (as he has already succeeded in bringing neutral umpire rule in Cricket).	“I will bring the electronic voting system to Pakistan, just like I brought the neutral umpire rule in the International Cricket, when I was the captain of Pakistan Cricket Team” (Khan, 2021).
20) <u>An upholder of democracy.</u>	
21) <u>Physical fitness.</u>	“I told them in start, that if they spend one month in the container, I will accept all their demands. We spent 126 days.” (Khan 2019).
22) <u>Determination.</u>	
23) <u>He is a born competitor.</u>	“The man (referring to himself) standing in front of you has fought for 30 years in sports. I have fought against brilliant people.” (Khan, 2020).
24) <u>He knows about the enemies of the country more than any other else</u> (for example India).	“I am a Pakistani who knows India more than anyone else because I went to India many times because of cricket, nobody knows the people of India better than me because I travelled across India.” (Khan, 2020).
25) <u>He is a Predictor.</u>	“I told you that their (political opponents) interests are same, and it is proved now, they all are getting united and are blackmailing me.” (Khan, 2020).
26) <u>People come out for him in intense situations</u>	“I watched on TV; the old people and people with special abilities came out (to vote) in intense heat” (Khan, 2020).
27) <u>There is meritocracy in his political party</u> (an ordinary man can climb to the top in it).	“Murad Saeed emerged from ISF (Insaaf Students Federation) and he is from an ordinary family and has become a federal minister. Because we have meritocracy” (Khan, 2019).

Apart from the above arguments which are constantly employed in Khan’s speeches to establish his moral legitimacy, it was found that he mostly uses the words like I, me, We, the

people, my nation, the lower class, and the oppressed class to assert his association to the people. Below is the chart which shows the most words used in the selected speeches:

Speech No.	I, Me	My Nation, My people	Oppressed Class, Lower Class	We
1	90	20	28	29
2	51	17	9	11
3	34	19	15	17
4	29	13	10	18
5	41	20	15	25
6	34	10	9	13
7	31	16	9	14
8	36	18	7	12
9	21	18	4	15
10	25	12	3	16

## 2) Identity of his Political Opponents

Khan considers all his political opponents as simply morally illegitimate. As if when they say or do something, the opposite would be right. In Khan’s own words: “If these thieves are talking

against ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) Chief and Army Chief, then it means that my choice was right, and I have appointed the right people for these posts. If these thieves are talking against ISI and Army Chief, it means that Army

Chief and ISI Chief are good people (.....). If there is something in the benefit of Pakistan, it will be of the loss of them (Political Opponents). And if there is something in their benefit, it will be of loss to Pakistan” (Khan, 2020).

In all the speeches that were analyzed, Khan constantly called his political opponents to have looted the country, calling them traitors and thieves. It is one of the basic themes on which all of Imran Khan’s political rhetoric is apparently based. He said in a speech: “I am

seeing this nation rise, but only when all these thieves are put behind the bars” (Khan, 2021).

Apart from explicitly calling his political opponents as corrupt, Khan uses 11 different arguments (implicit or explicit) to assert that his political opponents are morally illegitimate to run for power. Although these arguments are put forward again and again in every speech that was selected for this study, each type of argument is discussed only once in the following table.

Topoi of Moral Illegitimacy Employed.	Quoted Examples from the Speeches
1) <u>Indian Media celebrates their talks, and they are portrayed as heroes by Indian media.</u>	“If you watch the Indian media, it is celebrating and is very happy watching Maulana (Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman) talking, it seems that Maulana is an Indian national” (Khan, 2019).
2) <u>Foreign writers have written about their loot.</u>	“A book was published about these two (Nawaz Shareef and Asif Ali Zardari), its name was Capitalism: A Kill is Heal. It was written by Reymond Baker. There is a separate chapter on them that how they managed to loot Pakistan’s money and sent it abroad” (Khan, 2020).
3) <u>They came to politics without any struggle.</u>	“I am not like all others to whom their fathers gave whole political parties in inheritance” (Khan, 2019).
4) <u>All of the politicians live all their lives in cities.</u>	“Most of the decision makers and in fact all the decision makers in Pakistan are from cities. And they don’t really know what was happening outside the cities” (Khan, 2019).
5) <u>Indian leaders like them.</u>	“Narendra Modi gave statements that he likes Nawaz Shareef but not the Pakistani Army Chief” (Khan, 2020).
6) <u>They talk like Indian leaders.</u>	“The anti-Pakistan Army narrative that they are holding is same as anti-Pakistan Army narrative used by Narendra Modi in his political campaign” (Khan, 2020).
7) <u>Movies have been made in the West about their loot.</u>	“A corrupt man, a man to which the world refers to as corrupt, Asif Ali Zardari. The world has written about him. Some call him mister ten percent. Essays has been written on him. Films have been made on him abroad” (Khan, 2021).
8) <u>They cannot spend much time with the people like he does.</u>	“I told them in start, that if they spend one month in the container, I will accept all their demands. We spent 126 days” (Khan, 2019).
9) <u>They pretend to be against each other but they support each other when they face hurdles because their interests are same.</u>	“The day I came into power, I told you that all of them will be united against me because their interests are same. Only on paper they say that they are liberal, or they are islamists. But in actual they are all same. And for the Nawaz League they don’t even know who they are. They can become Jihadi or liberal depends on where they see money” (Khan, 2019).
10) <u>They had nothing before coming to power, they only came to power for their vested interests.</u>	“As for them, nobody knew about them at that time (before emerging in politics)” (Khan, 2019).
11) <u>People do not give them taxes because they do not believe them.</u>	“But we are at the lowest in giving taxes. And the reason was that people didn’t trust the government. They thought that their taxes were spent on the lavish lifestyle of the ruling elite” (Khan, 2019).

12) <u>They consider the nation as slaves,</u>	“(They say) Beggars are not choosers. They say we are slaves” (Khan, 2022).
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### 3) Homogeneity of the Identity of the Political Opponents

From the discourse analysis of the selected speeches, it was found that considers his political opponents as a homogenous group of

individuals with same attributes. Following are the examples of most used arguments where the topoi of homogeneity are employed by Khan for his political opponents (at least one example is given from every selected speech):

Topoi of Homogeneity Employed	Quoted Examples from the Speeches
<u>All of them get united against him.</u>	“When I asked about inquiry into 2013 general elections, all of them got united against me” (Khan, 2018).
(same as the above).	“I am the most personally attacked politician, they (his political opponents) all are after him” (Khan, 2018).
<u>All of them are spoon-fed.</u>	“Unlike all other politicians, I have seen ups and downs in politics” (Khan, 2019).
<u>They all have same interests.</u>	“I predicted that all of them would unite because their interests are the same” (Khan, 2020).
<u>All of them are busy blackmailing him.</u>	“They all have only one mission and that is to blackmail me for attaining NRO (National Reconciliation Order)” (Khan, 2021).
<u>All of them oppose him at the same time.</u>	“Now that I am supporting open ballot for senate elections and all of them have come against me” (Khan, 2020).
(Same as the above)	“In the senate elections all of them came up against me” (Khan, 2021).
(Same as the above)	“All of them are united. Achakzai has come from Baluchistan, who is a critic of Maulana. On the other hand, Bilawal has arrived and joined them, who calls himself liberal, but in actual he is liberally corrupt” (Khan, 2019).
<u>All of them unite when they are endangered</u>	“These politicians who are afraid of being caught because of corruption, all of them were present on same container” (Khan, 2019).
<u>All of them have same economic interests.</u>	“Economic interests make all of them united against him. Some call themselves liberals while others as Islamists but they all are same” (Khan, 2019).
<u>All of them are hurdle in Pakistan’s development.</u>	“Pakistan cannot develop unless all of them go behind the bars” (Khan, 2020).
<u>They are like a bouquet</u> (a bunch of flowers)	“During the last 10 years this bouquet ruled this country, they increased the debt of Pakistan 4 times than it was before” (Khan, 2019).
<u>Interests of all of them are against Pakistan.</u>	“I told you that their (Political Opponents) interests will always be against Pakistan, and it is proved now, they all are getting united and are blackmailing me” (Khan, 2020).
<u>All of them live their lives in cities.</u>	“All the decision makers live their whole lives in cities, they do not know about the problems in the peripheries” (Khan, 2019).
<u>All of them have ruled Pakistan for last 30 years.</u>	“All of them are ruling Pakistan from last 30 years” (Khan, 2022).

### 4) Institutions and the Two Imagined Social Camps

The two imagined social camps in Khan’s

political imaginary doesn’t only include politicians but institutions are also placed in either of these groups. In Khan’s rhetoric, either an institution is the best or the worst at a given

time, there is no middle hiding place. It is not unique to Khan; populist leaders are seen doing this. As according to Müller, “When in opposition, populists are bound to cast doubt on the institutions that produce the ‘morally wrong’ outcomes (because it has still not validated populist’s moral representative claim). Hence, they can accurately be described as ‘enemies of institutions’—although not of institutions in general. They are merely the enemies of mechanisms of representation that fail to vindicate their claim to exclusive moral representation” (Müller, 2016, p. 39).

In case of Khan, when he won the elections in 2018, he thanked ECP for conducting the transparent ever election in the history of Pakistan. In his own words: “...this is a historical election in the history of Pakistan. (.....) this election has been the transparent ever election in the history of Pakistan” (Khan, 2018). But when PTI lost the reserved seat for the capital territory in the 2021 Senate Elections, which meant that Khan did enjoy majority in the parliament, Khan accused his political opponents of using money in the elections and accused the ECP that it already knew about the use of money in horse trading. He accused ECP of destroying the morality of the nation. He said: “You (ECP) gave a chance to the culprits to discredit the democracy of the country (.....) You have damaged the morality of the nation” (Khan, 2021).

##### 5) His Party Members and Allies, and the Two Imagined Social Camps

In Khan’s political imaginary, at a given time,

his party members and allies are also placed in either of the two social camps. One day they are the best, while the other day they are the worst, there is no in between. To give an example, after losing the reserved seat of capital territory in Senate Elections of 2021 Khan said: “The election commission should have shown us the names of my party members who were sold out and I repeat they were sold out” (Khan, 2021). The very next day Khan called for vote of confidence and got 178 votes instead of the needed figure of 172. He thanked each of his party members in the words: “I want to thank my party members and allies for defeating this conspiracy. I know many of them were so upset that we lost Hafeez Sheikh’s (PTI’s candidate for reserved seat of capital territory) election. I know many of my party members and allies who came to vote even being ill” (Khan, 2021). The very same members who were bashed as traitors by Khan the day before became pure in the span of only one day because they validated Khan’s moral claim to authority.

##### 6) The Consistent Use of Superlatives

In order to cultivate antagonism between the two hypothetical social factions, Khan consistently employs superlative language in his discourse. The investigation revealed a pervasive utilization of superlatives such as "the best ever," "the worst ever," and "the biggest" in Khan's speeches. According to Elving deployment of superlatives is a characteristic feature observed in populist political rhetoric (Elving, 2020). The following table shows the number of times Imran Khan used superlatives in the 10 selected speeches for the study.

Speech Number	Number of times Superlatives are used
First	16
Second	10
Third	7
Fourth	8
Fifth	12
Sixth	9
Seventh	11
Eighth	18
Nineth	6
Tenth	5

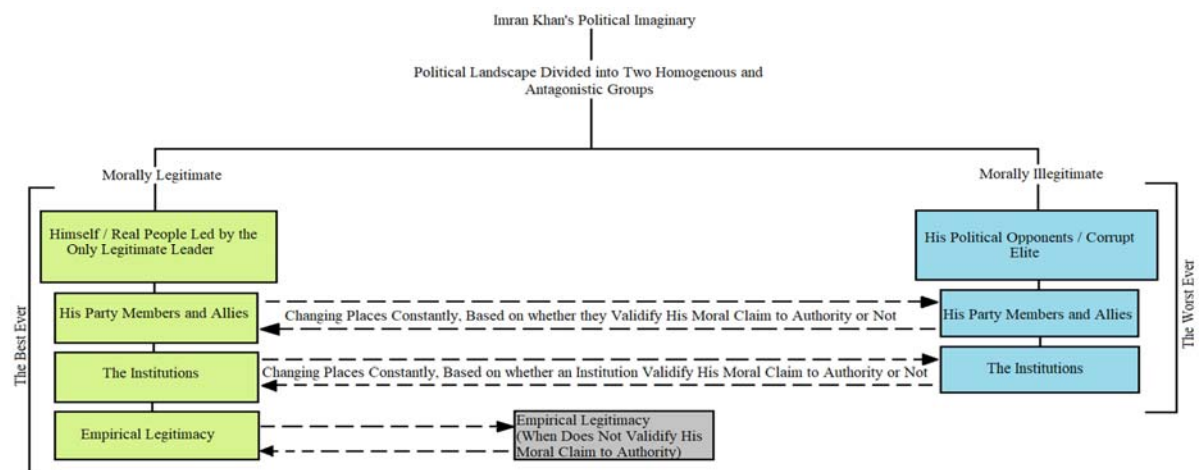
## 7) A Representative Claim Based More on Moral Legitimacy than Empirical Legitimacy

The study found that Khan emphasizes more on his moral legitimacy rather than his empirical legitimacy to power during his premiership. Khan's empirical legitimacy to power was constitutionally based on the majority he had in the parliament (The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973). But during his tenure he focused more on his moral legitimacy. Large portion of all the speeches that were analyzed consisted of Khan's use of different arguments (discussed in heading number 1) for asserting his moral legitimacy to power.

An example that supports the argument of Khan's longing for moral legitimacy compared to his empirical legitimacy is that Khan consistently emphasizes that people entrusted him with money in the form of charity from long ago, but they did not pay taxes to the previous governments because people didn't trust morally illegitimate politicians (Khan, 2019). Now, let's consider one of the major functions of the modern state: to collect taxes and spend them on public goods (Tanzi, 1997). Khan's consistently used plea that people entrust him with money for charity purposes and abstain from giving taxes to the governments asserts that he has been the leader of the people even before he came to power in 2018 on the basis of empirical legitimacy (as he has been performing the functions that need to be performed by the

government).

Another example is that after losing the seat reserved for capital territory in the senate, which meant that Khan did not enjoy majority in the parliament, Khan immediately called for Vote of Confidence the very next day and said "I have decided to go for the vote of confidence tomorrow. (...). I call my nation to gather in front of the National Assembly tomorrow. (...). Even if I ceased to be the PM, I would still not leave these traitors unharmed" (Khan, 2021). At the time he decided to go for Vote of Confidence, he did not know the outcome of the voting. If he were to lose the confidence of the majority of the Members of the National Assembly (representatives of the people in the parliament), he would lose the representative claim based on empirical legitimacy to power. Instead, he called the nation to gather in front of the National Assembly during the voting and informed them that he would not leave these traitors unharmed even if he ceases to be Prime Minister. This indicates that Khan emphasizes more on moral legitimacy for authority rather than empirical legitimacy. He called the nation not on the pretext of empirical legitimacy (as it was undecided at that moment) but on his moral legitimacy. This is because the populist representative claim, according to Müller, "is of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature, it cannot be disproven" (Müller, 2016, p. 39).



## Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Imran Khan's speeches during his tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan (2018-2022) through the lens of Jan-Werner Müller's theory of populism, coupled with Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), provides valuable insights into the populist dimensions of his political personality. It was found that Khan considers the society to be ultimately divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups (the real people and the corrupt elite) based on moral legitimacy and illegitimacy. It is noteworthy that, in Khan's political worldview, these social divisions extend beyond individual entities such as himself, the general populace, or fellow politicians, as institutions also undergo dynamic shifts in it over time.

The discourse analysis underscores Khan's strategic use of superlative language to amplify the antagonism between these two social camps, reinforcing his populist narrative. Importantly, the emphasis on imagined moral legitimacy to power, as opposed to empirical legitimacy, sheds light on Khan's distinct approach to justifying his political authority.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how populism manifests in the rhetoric of political leaders, particularly in the case of Imran Khan. The findings highlight the centrality of moral narratives and social divisions in shaping Khan's political worldview, offering valuable perspectives for scholars, policymakers, and the public interested in comprehending the dynamics of populist leadership in contemporary politics.

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