

# Analyzing Imran Khan's Transformative Political Strategy through 2018 National Election Campaigns

Nehal KHAN

## 1. Introduction

Throughout Pakistan's political history, Imran Khan emerged as a remarkably transformative leader (Medium 2024) who received immense support. Due to his unique emotional appeal, he is often regarded as a populist leader. His populist moment began with his entry into politics through the formation of his party, the PTI, in 1996. Imran Khan tried to challenge the dominance of rival parties like the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Imran Khan built a narrative exposing the corruption of these parties, portraying them as the corrupt elite that had brought Pakistan to the verge of economic collapse (Faiz 2022, 60-61). Imran Khan's politics thus developed a populist narrative focused on fighting for the common people against the corrupt elite, targeting Nawaz Sharif and the Bhutto family (former ruling parties in Pakistan). This selective exploitation of anti-corruption rhetoric is an archetypical populist strategy that creates a dichotomous worldview where the point of reference in common is the corrupt elite versus the pure people (Mudde 2004, 543).

However, Imran Khan's political messaging was marked not only by his populist rhetoric but also by a leadership image and persona, a vision of national sovereignty, and promises of social welfare and economic reform for youth and different socio-economic segments, which enhanced his overall appeal as a leader who is developmentalist. These themes were strategically crafted to address a diverse spectrum of voters, including disengaged and disillusioned youth and those facing economic hardships from diverse socio-economic groups (Monde 2024). Therefore, understanding the effectiveness of Imran Khan's election campaign involves examining how the themes he used were

communicated, which specific demographic groups were targeted, and what impact this had on the election results.

Many studies on Imran Khan and his political journey often mark him as a populist leader. This article argues that Imran Khan's rhetoric was not entirely populist, as traditionally appeared in previous studies. However, this article argues that it combined a populist approach and a mixture of carefully crafted political strategies to target diverse electorates. Imran Khan's approach was built around a few core aspects that resonated deeply with the concerns of Pakistani citizens. One of his focuses was anti-corruption, which was intended to appeal to voters frustrated with the existing political system, which was a populist approach. At the same time, his emphasis on national sovereignty resonated with those who felt their country's dignity was being compromised, and the promises of social welfare and economic development were designed to address the needs of the economically disadvantaged (Khurshid 2023), an approach that moves away from traditional populist approach. To examine the effectiveness of his approach, such as how well his narratives were received by the voters and resulted in voter mobilization, the article uses statistical data from the 2018 national election to evaluate how his election campaign themes resonated with various voter groups and assess the impact of his speeches and public statements on the voter's turnout. This article first explores the central themes of Imran Khan's election campaign. It investigates how these themes were designed to tackle the pressing issues faced by Pakistani citizens and how they were intended to mobilize different segments of society. Secondly, the article assesses the effectiveness of Imran Khan's discourse by looking at statistical data from the 2018 elections and analyzes the speeches he delivered during the campaign; in so doing, this article tries to evaluate whether Imran Khan's policies were entirely populist as framed by many studies, conducted on him.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

Populism is a complex phenomenon with various meanings that have evolved over a period of time. As Ruth Collier (2001) has pointed out, the main problem of defining populism lies in the fact that the existing conceptualizations incorporate very different traits as defining properties of populism. Moreover, the very core idea of populism tends to receive a negative impression in both

the scholarly debate and real-life implications. It is sometimes considered a threat to democracy because of how it pursues problematic goals, such as the exclusion of ethnic minorities, and it is often analyzed as a pathological phenomenon. Therefore, defining populism presents a challenge, not only because of the absence of an agreed definition of its defining properties but also due to its normative considerations.

Scholars have summed up the meaning of populism into four major streams of ideas. The primary view for over two decades holds that populism is a political strategy for mobilizing the electorate (Rueda 2020, 1). The second view holds that populism is a discourse used by people showing grievances against the establishment. The third view holds that populism is a style or behavior of leadership; this type of populism defies clear-cut left-right categorization (Mudde et al. 2012). This phenomenon is comparatively new, and it gave rise to a neo-politics phenomenon called "valence populism," termed by Zulianello Mattia, which suggests that "the parties compete by focusing on non-positional or clear-cut left or right issues such as the battle against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform, and moral integrity while focusing on the anti-establishments" (Zulianello 2020, 329). The last view holds that populism is an ideational concept separating society into homogeneous and antagonist groups (Mudde 2017, 28-31). While it is challenging to come up with a precise definition of populism, the main feature that receives agreement among various scholars is critical features that explain the dichotomous nature of "the people" versus "the elite" and, at times, "the others" as part of the "problem" faced by the ordinary people or the citizens of the country (Mudde 2004, 543). These ideological shifts touch upon the deep-rooted social anxieties about cultural and demographic changes.

Therefore, the characteristics mentioned above of populism have been identified in the analysis of populism in Europe. Social Scientists' have utilized the concept of populism to explain political developments in Europe initially. In the context of South Asian countries like India and Pakistan, where religion has been a pivotal factor in the formation of these countries, there is a lack of literature on populist leaders in countries like Pakistan.

The existing literature on Imran Khan's rise to Pakistan's leadership in 2018 has received some scholarly attention, with some studies, such as by Yilmaz and Shakil titled "Imran Khan: From Cricket Batsman to Populist Captain," call

Imran Khan's rise to popularity as a populist phenomenon due to his anti-corruption rhetoric, and strong personality. While these analyses provide valuable insights into his appeal, these studies often overlook his campaign's multi-factor aspects and strategic dimensions beyond the populist rhetoric. Moreover, some scholarly works have explored the dimensions of Imran Khan's populism, such as Afzal, Summaya, Hassan, and Ahmed (2021) in their article titled "Using Rhetorical and Persuasive Techniques: A Political Discourse Analysis of the Victory Speech by Imran Khan" argue that Imran Khan's campaign was characterized by populist rhetoric that revolved around anti-corruption and personality-based populism.

The studies mentioned above asserted that Imran Khan effectively portrayed himself as an outsider challenging the corrupt political elite, resonating with the frustrations of a broad base of voters. This anti-elitism and his promise of creating a "New Pakistan" is a classic populist strategy designed to appeal to the masses (Yilmiz & Kainat 2021, 8). However, one of the only studies covering the diverse aspects of Imran Khan's campaigns beyond populism was done by Batool (2023). In the study titled "Determinants of populist voting in Pakistan," Batool (2023) discusses how Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party utilized a blend of charisma, anti-elitism to capitalize on public disengagement with traditional political parties and political elites. Batool highlights the populist technique of positioning Imran Khan as a leader who transcends conventional politics, offering a new direction for the country.

In this article, I argue that Imran Khan's approach was not entirely populist because he utilized anti-corruption rhetoric and an anti-establishment stance and employed strategies such as economic reforms. His economic reforms focused on restructuring, job creation, and poverty alleviation align with economic nationalism, where the protection and promotion of the national economy are central themes, often invoking a sense of national pride and collective progress that go beyond populism. Moreover, his plan to engage the youth through promises of educational betterment and employment opportunities shows a "developmental" approach, appealing to younger and diverse socio-economic groups concerned with their future. This blend of populism with other political strategies allowed him to mobilize a diverse electorate. Therefore, his electoral success shall not only be seen merely as a populist but also as a reflection of his ability to integrate diverse political

approaches into a coherent and compelling campaign. For example, his economic reforms for helping the middle-class segment and being a charismatic leader for youth through educational reforms and a sportsman persona were part of his multifaceted approach to mobilizing voters (Yaqin et al. 2023, 15).

This disconnection between the academic portrayal of Imran Khan as a mere populist leader and the reality of his broader appeal in Pakistan underscores the need to understand his leadership beyond populism. Thus, this article tries to fill the gaps that exist in the previous literature by contributing not only to the ongoing study of populism and discourse studies but also to the area of political communication and election campaign studies by providing an in-depth analysis of Imran Khan's 2018 election campaign through a multidimensional framework through which he communicated his political messages to a broader electorate. Therefore, focusing beyond the conventional populism that the previous studies highlight, this article underscores the importance of strategic diversity in political communication.

## 1. 2. Methodology

For this article, I applied qualitative and quantitative methodologies to comprehend Imran Khan's election campaign speeches and the data from the 2018 national elections. The data is derived from various sources such as Gallup Pakistan, Index of Electoral Record, and the Election Commission of Pakistan. Using the voters' election data, I conducted data analysis to analyze his support among the electorate. For analysis of Imran Khan's political speeches, I used various Pakistan newspapers, such as Geo, Express Tribune, and Dawn, which heavily covered his campaign during the 2018 national elections. This allowed me to analyze whether Imran Khan's political stance was merely populist or whether his policies and campaign strategies went beyond the populist approach.

## 1. 3. Background: Political Parties in the 2018 National Elections

Pakistan People's Party is a socialist, progressive left-wing party founded by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1967 (Hussain 2018, 155). PPP is a powerful party in Pakistan, and the party's leadership has been led by individuals from the Bhutto family, such as Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, and Bilawal Bhutto, the grandson of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. PPP struggled tremendously in

Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq's regimes. The founder of the PPP, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, was sentenced to death by a dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, in 1979; later, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated during one of her election rallies in 2007 (Jones & Owen 2020, 182-244). However, the PPP gained significance after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007 (Sani Hussain 2018, 2). In 2018, PPP was the first among the three main political parties to publish its manifesto on June 28, 2018, with the slogan: "Bi Bi ka Waada Nibhana hai - Pakistan bachana hai." (We have to keep Benazir's Promise and Save Pakistan) (PPP Manifesto 2018).

In their 2018 manifesto, published by PPP Org, the main message was the promise of poverty alleviation, economic reforms, democracy promotion, provision of fundamental rights to the people, and lifting Pakistan to its proper place in foreign affairs (PPP Manifesto 2018). This message was similar to the one they used in the 2008 and 2013 national elections.

Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), is a center-right party established by Fida Mohammad in 1988, who served as a governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 1986, while Nawaz Sharif became his first secretary-general. After the death of Fida Mohammad, Nawaz Sharif dissolved the alliance and formed his party called PMNL (Siddiqui 2022). In the 2018 elections, PML (N) published its election manifesto on July 5, 2018. The former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, the party head also ousted from office because of the Panama Scandal Case, returned to run for elections in 2018 as a candidate. His party's message in the manifesto was focused on judicial reforms, prosperity and protection for people with low incomes, taxation, and financial development, increase in economic growth up to 7 percent, strengthening ties with India through dialogue, and proceeding on completion of CPEC (China, Pakistan Economic Corridor) project (Manifesto 2018).

In their early career, Tehreek-e-Insaaf needed more success. The party's chairman, Imran Khan, won a seat in the Pakistani general elections in 2002. However, his party planned to boycott the 2008 election, claiming that the elections were rigged and that the Supreme Court Judge should be reinstated (NPR 2007). However, in 2013, PTI got over 7.5 million votes, making it second in the number of votes and third in the number of seats won (About Pakistan, n.d).

In 2018, on July 9<sup>th</sup>, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf published its manifesto, and in the manifesto, it introduced its major slogans, such as "Road to Naya (new)

Pakistan.” Imran Khan promised the citizens that Pakistan would become an Islamic welfare state (Riyasat-e-Madina) (Shakil & Yilmaz 2021). He proposed this idea to implement zero tolerance for corruption, provide autonomy to the National Accountability Bureau, bring changes in the judiciary, harmonization relationship with Balochistan by understanding the problems of the Baloch people, create educational reforms by introducing curriculum changes, and implement 20% budget on education, provision of 10 million jobs to the youth and construction of 5 million homes (PMO 2018). This manifesto has all its attractions for youth and lower and middle-income groups.

## 2. The Main Themes of Imran Khan's Campaign

Imran Khan's campaign during the 2018 election was strategically crafted, focusing on themes that resonated well with the Pakistani citizens. His main message was a strong stance against corruption, which he framed as the root cause of the country's economic and social injustices. By positioning himself and his party, PTI, as the gatekeeper of transparency and accountability, Imran Khan touched upon the widespread public frustration with the corrupt political elite. On top of that, his campaign focused on nationalism and sovereignty, advocating for a Pakistan free from external influences or, in other words, foreign influences and able to stand on its ground in the global arena. The appeal for national pride and promises of comprehensive economic reforms aimed at revitalizing the economy, creating jobs, and reducing poverty. Thus, by integrating these themes, Imran Khan tried to captivate a broad support base across different segments of society.

### 2. 1. Anti-Corruption and Justice

Historically, corruption has long been a critical issue in Pakistan. It has significantly undermined public trust in government institutions and paralyzed economic growth. Imran Khan's anti-corruption messages directly challenged the political elite, which he accused of taking unlawful advantage at the cost of the citizens' misery. He fought a relentless battle against corruption. He used this theme as a rhetorical mechanism and a fundamental part of his political identity (Rahman et al. 2021).

His campaign effectively used various platforms to communicate his anti-

corruption stance. For example, his speeches, social media posts, and public appearances consistently highlighted the need for a clean and transparent government. He promised to introduce concrete economic and judicial reforms to eliminate corruption by strengthening institutions like the judiciary and the anti-corruption bureau. The effectiveness of this theme was evident in the widespread public support that Imran Khan achieved.

## 2.2. Nationalism and Sovereignty

Nationalism and Pakistan's sovereignty were yet another significant component of Imran Khan's campaign. This rhetoric underlined the fact that it was time for Pakistan to regain its self-reliance and dignity, which Pakistan citizens were looking for and had been sacrificed by previous governments. In his speeches, Imran Khan often talked about the vision of Naya Pakistan or a "New Pakistan," a vision for a country free of external interference and corruption within the system, using the model of Medina (Yilmaz & Shakil 2021, 8).

Imran Khan's ideology for developing Pakistani national identity by constructing nationalism as pride was well received. He exposed other politicians as corrupt individuals operating in a politically corrupted system encouraged by Western-influenced democracies, declaring his party as the defender of the interests of the people of Pakistan. This ensured that the Pakistani citizens could feel that sense of togetherness and devotion (Muhammad 2023). His approach to fighting for pride and his nationalism worked among citizens who suffered from disillusionment and the loss of Pakistan's standing in front of the world at the hands of the past governments.

## 2.3. Social Welfare and Economic Reform

Economic welfare and social reforms were among the aspects that Imran promoted as part of his ideological and developmentalism approach. Imran Khan knew that many citizens want good-quality education, health care, and social security; these are the necessities one can expect from a state. Therefore, his message was to transform a flawed society into a social welfare state where everyone has equal health, education, and security opportunities.

Similarly, Imran Khan focused on this theme to address the pressing issues faced, especially by a lower-income segment of the country. These initiatives align with the literature on social protection theory, which emphasizes the



government's role in targeted social programs for improving the lives of marginalized populations (Barrientos & Hulme 2009, 5-6). Therefore, he emphasized targeting marginalized groups such as lower-income groups. This strategy was effective in mobilizing voters from lower-income groups. The party then started projecting itself using slogans like "insaf," which refers to justice. As a result, the supporters of PTI were termed Insafians (justice seekers) times, as Youthias (the youth) (Yilmaz & Shakil 2021, 7). This helped Imran Khan gain significant popularity among the youth and lower-income segments who were disillusioned with previous governments

### 3. The Effectiveness of Imran Khan's Campaign Strategies and Rhetoric

Imran Khan's 2018 election campaign strategically leveraged essential rhetoric through his campaigns, such as anti-corruption, youth empowerment, gender inclusion, and middle and lower-class advocacy through economic reforms, to resonate with a broad and diverse range of voters. Imran Khan positioned himself as a champion and guardian against corruption; he appealed to voters frustrated with the previous government due to corruption and elitism. His focus on youth mobilized young voters who were eager for change. Moreover, the gender-based messages aimed at women's empowerment, primarily through the economic and educational spectrum, reforms broadened his appeal further. At the same time, his emphasis on issues affecting the middle and lower classes helped him connect with a broad demographic across urban and rural areas, ultimately expanding PTI's voter base.

#### 3.1. Mobilization through Anti-Corruption Messaging

Imran Khan's anti-corruption messaging was one of the most compelling aspects of his campaign rhetoric. By consistently highlighting corruption as a central problem, he triggered widespread public sentiments that viewed corruption as a significant factor impeding the country's progress and further worsened the socio-economic disparity. This section explores how Imran Khan's anti-corruption discourse mobilized various population segments and contributed to his political success.

Imran Khan's narrative framed corruption as an economic or legal issue and

a moral crisis requiring prompt attention. He portrayed himself as the only candidate capable of dealing with this crisis, positioning his party as the guardian of a new era of transparency and accountability (Afzal et al.; Ahmed 2021). This moral framing of corruption resonated deeply with voters across different demographics, creating a powerful emotional connection and a sense of urgency for change.

During one of his speeches in Gujranwala city in Pakistan, addressing his concerns for the nation and accusing the establishment, he mentioned, “The thing I am preparing this nation for I would need the youth of this nation a lot for Haqeeqi Azadi (actual freedom)” (Dawn 2022). Here, he indicated that the people of Pakistan need absolute freedom from the influence of corrupt elites, who have abused the system and the citizens for many decades.

The effectiveness of this approach was evident through the electoral gains Imran Khan made. Data from the Election Commission of Pakistan indicates that PTI saw substantial increases in vote share compared to the 2013 elections, particularly in regions where anti-corruption sentiment was strongest (ECP 2018). This success was driven by Imran Khan’s ability to effectively communicate his anti-corruption message and appeal to voters frustrated with the political system heavily flawed by corruption.

### 3. 2. The Youth Focused Campaigns

A critical factor in the effectiveness of Imran Khan’s election campaign was his ability to engage and mobilize young voters. Disillusioned by the years of political turmoil and economic challenges, young Pakistani citizens found a new hope in Imran Khan’s promise of a Naya Pakistan (New Pakistan) (Yilmaz & Shakil 2021, 8). His campaign effectively utilized social media and modern communication techniques to reach this tech-savvy voter, and his campaign about educational reforms also resonated well with those underprivileged youth who seek essential educational opportunities to enhance their quality of life further and create a better future. (Sajid et al. 2024)

Imran Khan’s use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube was pivotal in connecting with young voters. On Facebook, his official page had more than 10 million followers by the time of the 2018 national election. His Facebook posts related to his campaign regularly received thousands of comments, likes, and shares, demonstrating high levels of

engagement. The study conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (2019) during Imran Khan's 2018 election campaign period recorded an average of 10,000 shares and 50,000 likes per post.

Imran Khan's party leaned towards social media platforms to convey their messages, engage with young supporters, and counteract negative narratives from opposition parties (Sajid et al., 2024). This strategic use of digital media allowed him to build a solid online presence and mobilize a significant portion of the voters, especially the young tech-savvy youth. For example, when Imran Khan posted a tweet on youth employment on May 15, 2018, his message was, "Our youth are our greatest asset. PTI's policies will create millions of jobs for young Pakistanis" (Imran Khan Twitter, 15 May 2018). This tweet received 45,000 likes and 8,000 retweets.

Similarly, in his tweet on educational reforms posted on June 10, 2018, he said that "education is the cornerstone of a prosperous nation" and that "PTI will ensure quality education for all (#EducationForAll #NayaPakistan). This tweet got around 40,000 likes and 7,500 retweets. This focus on youth issues was a central theme in his rhetoric.

Imran Khan, in his conference held at the Future Investment Initiative Conference (FIIC) held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, addressed:

Pakistan has 100 million people below the age of 35. We are trying to create an enabling environment for investment. The plan is not just to attract foreign and overseas investors but our own investors as well (Dawn 2018).

Therefore, in various speeches and social media posts, Imran Khan frequently highlighted the need for job creation, educational reforms, and opportunities for young people to participate in politics. This focus on youth empowerment helped him build a solid support base among younger voters, who were eager for change and saw him as a candidate who understood their needs (Hassan 2019).

Youth engagement has been one of Imran Khan's main focuses since 2013, and it became more assertive in the 2018 national election. Various surveys have been conducted to explain Imran Khan's engagement in youth mobilization. One of these was conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 2018, which

shows that around 35% of young citizens aged 18 to 24 voted for PTI in 2018’s national elections. Meanwhile, around 50% of young citizens participated in the 2013 national election, according to a survey conducted by Gallup in 2018.

Another prominent survey by the British Council in 2013 tried to study young people’s political preferences. The reports suggested that only around 14% of young citizens aged 18 to 29 in Pakistan were interested in politics; the majority mentioned that they had no interest in politics. This trend shows that fewer young people were generally mobilized during and before the 2013 national elections. However, Imran Khan’s policies and campaign strategy helped to enhance youth political mobilization significantly.

Table 1: Age and Voters Turnout in the 2018 National Elections

Age Group	Percentage Supporting PTI
18 to 24	35%
25 to 29	33%

[Source: Gallup Pakistan, 2019]

Imran Khan’s focus on employment opportunities and educational reforms highly appealed to this demographic group, as shown in Table 1. The percentage of young voters aged 18 to 24 who voted for PTI remained high at 35%. Meanwhile, those aged 25 to 29 voted at 33%, which shows significant participation among young voters in the 2018 national election.

### 3. 3. Middle-Class Resonance: Demand for Transparency and Justice

The term “Middle class” is frequently encountered in social sciences research; however, there is a lack of consensus regarding its precise definition. It is generally perceived as the social gap between the lower and upper classes, distinguishing the affluent from the impoverished. Yet, there is no mutual agreement on the precise definition of these groups. Most definitions and literature about the middle class are somewhat unclear and imprecise. The term class has historical roots, but in the contemporary socio-political landscape, the interest in the middle class has surged, mainly due to its emergence in Asian economies such as India and China, which have continued to thrive in the presence of global economic shifts. The classical understanding of class can be traced back to Karl Marx’s framework, which is based on the relationship to

the means of production, and Max Weber's categorization, which considers wealth, prestige, and power (Wright 2003, 1-3).

In an evaluative study of the middle-class demographic in Pakistan, Durre-Nayab (2011) employed the concept of the 'expanded middle class.' Her findings suggest that approximately 35 percent of Pakistan's total population, equating to around 61 million individuals, can be classified as middle class. To explain the class structure, the Durre Nayab utilized various indicators, including lifestyle, housing, income, occupation, and education (14-16). The middle class in Pakistan, as Durre Nayab (2011) argues, is located in urban areas of Pakistan. The problem is that the middle-class population contributes much to the government revenue as they have been burdened by a heavy taxation system in Pakistan (Adeel, 2024). On the other hand, Pakistan's economy mainly favors the country's elites, who derive resources through subsidies, tax exemptions, and other policies (Baig 2024). This results in the urban middle class being frustrated by the government's lack of effectiveness.

In this context, Imran Khan transmitted his messages about the need for a transparent government. He promised to create a transparent government where everyone would be accountable and economic and social justice would prevail, which would benefit especially those who are the country's taxpayers (PMO 2018, 12). This is why, Imran Khan's message resonated very well with the urban middle class. He appealed to their grievance of economic disparity between those loyal to their country and those contributing substantially to the economy by paying heavy taxes and premiums, as stated above.

### **3.4. Lower-Income Resonance: Hope for Social Welfare and Economic Stability**

Imran Khan's promises of social welfare and economic stability were pivotal in mobilizing lower-income groups. His vision of a welfare state, where the government would provide essential needs like healthcare and education, provided hope to those who struggled with poverty and lack of access to necessities. Imran Khan's discourse further emphasized the need for economic justice and the stability of marginalized communities. His promises to introduce social welfare programs to diminish poverty and support underprivileged citizens were received well among many lower-income voters. This focus on social welfare and economic reform was a critical factor in his ability to garner support from these demographic groups (Yaqin et al. 2024).

The data from the 2018 elections also indicates that a significant portion of Imran Khan’s support came from lower-income constituencies. According to a survey conducted by Gallup through Gilani’s Index of Electoral Record in 2018, published in 2019, approximately 42% of PTI’s supporters were from lower-income brackets, thus reflecting the effectiveness of the social welfare messaging he conveyed to different segments of the socio-economic groups. In the 2018 national election, Imran Khan directly addressed lower and middle-income citizens and gave them a firm promise and hope for change. He stated in various campaign speeches that: “My hope is that Pakistan will be a welfare state, where we take care of our poor people” (Global Citizen 2018).

Imran Khan’s claims and promise of establishing a fair and equal governance for all, regardless of their social status, went well with voters from various socio-economic segments. The election survey conducted in 2018 shows that around 42% of those who supported Imran Khan were from lower-income groups. This indicates that Imran was successful in delivering his message to lower-income groups.

Table 2: Income Bracket and Voters Turnout in the 2018 National Elections

<b><i>Income Bracket</i></b>	<b>Percentage of Voters Supporting PTI</b>
Below \$100 per month	42%
Between \$100- \$200 per month	34%
Above \$200 per month	36%

[Source: Gilani’s Index of Electoral Record (Gallup, 2019)]

The data in Table 2 shows that 42% of the citizens with less than \$100 income bracket per month voted, whereas 34% of those whose income bracket per month was between \$200 to \$500 voted for him. This shows that Imran Khan’s promises of social welfare and economic reform resonated strongly with different segments of socio-economic groups but more so with lower-income groups.

### 3. 5. Region-Based Approach and Emotional Attachment

Imran Khan and his party PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf) adopted a carefully crafted electoral strategy in the 2018 national elections by focusing their campaign on Pakistan’s major cities with large population densities like Karachi,

Islamabad, Peshawar, and Lahore, unlike many other political parties that primarily targeted cities where rival parties already had a strong voter base. The most populous regions are Punjab, with 110 million people; Sindh, with 48 million people; and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with 31 million people (World Counts 2023). This approach was used to directly reach the electorate with diverse backgrounds, such as educated youth, middle-class citizens, lower-class segments, and diverse ethnic groups who were increasingly disengaged with traditional politics. By focusing on big cities, PTI focused on a broader and more diverse electorate, leveraging its message of anti-corruption, governance reform, and economic revival to maintain deep connections among the diverse voters.

#### **Lahore: The Call for Youth Empowerment**

Lahore, the third-largest city in Pakistan, with a population of 11 million, has been a support base for the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), one of the major rivals of Imran Khan's party. This is one of the main reasons why Lahore was a battleground for PTI to gain votes.

Imran Khan chose Minar-E-Pakistan ground for his speech in Lahore. Minar-E-Pakistan is a famous historical place where various critical political decisions were made during the initial years of Pakistan's formation. Imran Khan delivered a historical speech there and called upon citizens for social reforms; he also said that "we are building a future for our children"(Dawn 2018). He delivered these messages to the youth by directly addressing them. For example, he also mentioned, "Youth of Pakistan, this is your time" (Dawn 2018).

On one occasion, when attending a Shaukat Khanum Memorial Hospital visit, he posted on Facebook that "Children are the future of this nation, and we must do everything in our power to protect them from any harm, especially a disease that can be prevented" (Imran Khan Official Facebook July 2015).

He further emphasized creating more job opportunities and educational reforms for youth (PMO 2018). Therefore, messages like these deeply resonated with the young voter, enhancing his support base among young Pakistani voters.

#### **Karachi: A Hope for Economic Justice**

Karachi, the economic hub of Pakistan, generates almost 70% of the country's revenue. Pakistan has experienced rapid urbanization, with a sevenfold increase

in urban population from 1950 to 2011 (World Count 2018). This has led to the emergence of megacities such as Karachi, with 25 million people, according to a 2017 report conducted by the World Counts. Therefore, Karachi has remained the primary target for the PTI's election campaign. Imran Khan delivered speeches on economic reforms and the social justice system outside the Karachi Club Grounds. In the speech, he addressed the financial challenges faced by the Karachiites, particularly those in the lower-income segment. He promised to address poverty and inequality with a strong emphasis on economic reforms, stating that "Karachi's prosperity will be the cornerstone of our new economic policy" (Geo News 2018).

During his campaign in Karachi, he proposed specific economic proposals, such as tax relief reforms, infrastructure improvements, and long-term employment benefits for Karachi's working-class population. His focus on financial issues was based on Karachi's diverse economic landscape, where the daily wage earners and low-income citizens are heavily impacted by growing inflation. In this sense, one can say that he addressed the pressing concerns of people in Karachi.

#### **Peshawar: Focus on Education and Health**

Imran Khan's speech, delivered in Peshawar at Peshawar University, focused on citizens' educational and healthcare needs. He targeted young voters and students by directly addressing them: "Our children deserve the best education, and our families deserve quality healthcare" (The News International 2018). Through this specific message, he emphasized the flaws and disparities within the public services sector that many citizens suffered; he also promised to enhance and implement new reforms to develop new educational facilities and healthcare systems that benefit everyone, especially the youth. He addressed the youth. Therefore, he strategically delivered a speech at Peshawar University, where most participants were young students. His message for education and health care was designed to address the concerns of Peshawar's residents, who had been dissatisfied with the years-long flaws, nepotism, and ineffectiveness of public services.

#### **Islamabad: National Sovereignty and Governance**

Imran Khan's campaign rally at Jinnah Avenue in Islamabad had a central



theme focusing on national sovereignty and good governance. Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan, and Imran Khan’s message on national sovereignty and good governance was very strategic, as many government decisions take place there. In this rally, he addressed the need for unbiased governance and leaders who would prioritize Pakistan’s interests over external influences (Western forces). He stated, “We will restore Pakistan’s dignity and ensure that our policies reflect our national interests” (PMO 2018).

These themes of good governance and national sovereignty were designed to appeal to voters concerned with the country’s international status and the influence of foreign powers in domestic political affairs, which Imran Khan considered to be a threat to the status quo. His rhetoric in this rally was intended to build trust among voters who valued national integrity and self-reliance and were unhappy with foreign political interferences in the domestic political landscape.

The voter turnout in major cities where Imran Khan actively campaigned was also significant. The following table provides details on voter turnout in key cities in 2013 vs 2018:

Table 3: Voter Turnout in Major Cities

<b>City Based</b>	<b>Voter Turnout in 2018</b>	<b>Voter Turnout in 2013</b>
Karachi	55%	34%
Lahore	60%	36%
Islamabad	70%	60%
Peshawar	45%	43%

[Source: Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018]

The data in Table 3 above represent statistics from different cities in Pakistan. As we discussed earlier, Lahore was the support base for the PMNL party, making it very difficult for Imran Khan to mobilize support. However, his approach and effective campaigning secured 60% of voter turnout, compared to only 36% in 2013. This shows that their popularity almost doubled throughout the election.

On the other hand, data from Karachi shows that the overall turnout was 55% in the 2018 election, although it was 34% in the previous election. This again shows the emergence of Imran Khan’s party and the immense support they received.

The data from Peshawar shows a voter turnout of 45%, which was 2% higher than the turnout from 2013. This shows that Imran Khan’s active campaign in Peshawar helped spread his message about anti-corruption and connected deeply with the voters.

Lastly, Islamabad, the country’s capital, already had the highest turnout, 60% in 2013, which increased to 70% in 2018, showing immense support for PTI and its message on reforming national sovereignty and governance.

Overall, the data suggests a rising trend in all major cities. However, significant progress was made in the cities like Karachi and Lahore. Moreover, Imran Khan’s campaign strategies were tailored to address regional concerns, leading to varied levels of support across different regions. The following table shows the distribution of PTI’s support in terms of seats won from each region:

Table 4: Region-based success of PTI

<b>Region</b>	<b>Seats Won by PTI in 2018</b>	<b>Seats Won by PTI in 2013</b>
Punjab	61 out of 141	30 out of 148
Sindh	14 out of 61	1 out of 61
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	30 out of 39	17 out of 35
Balochistan	4 out of 16	0 out of 14
Islamabad	2 out 3	1 out 2

[Source: Results: Pakistan Election Aljazeera, 2018]

Table 4 above shows the region-based success of the seats won by the PTI during the 2013 and 2018 national elections. Punjab was the region where PTI secured the highest seats, 61 out of 141; this was a significant jump from the previous election, where they won 30 seats out of 148. On the other hand, in Sindh PTI won 14 seats out of 61 in the 2018 election; this was significant progress considering they only secured 1 out of 61 in the 2013 election.

Meanwhile, in Islamabad, they had two seats in 2018 and 1 seat in 2013 elections. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PTI won 30 out of 39 seats, which led to a significant victory in 2018, compared to 17 out of 35 seats in 2013. However, in Balochistan, they also progressed from 0 seats in 2013 to 4 out of 16 seats in 2018. The overall data shows a remarkable gain for the PTI in the 2018 national election. This suggests that the PTI’s campaigns were effective in mobilizing a diverse electorate over different regions of Pakistan.

## 4. Conclusion

Imran Khan's victory in the 2018 national election showed a significant shift in Pakistan's political landscape, especially after his defeat in the 2013 national elections. Imran Khan learned from his experiences, skilfully drafted his narratives, and introduced the concept of incorporating populist and developmentalist approaches and, for example, promoting "Riyasat-e-Madina" as a model for the welfare state based on Islamic law (practiced 1400 years ago by Prophet Mohammad). He proposed this model to counter corruption and elitism in Pakistan, along with his economic reforms and policy proposals for job creation and housing schemes. This approach resonated well with the diverse voters tired of years-long political scandals of previous leaders and provided an Islamist framework that aligned with many citizens' aspirations for a just and equitable society.

The main argument of this article highlights the fact that Imran Khan was not just a populist leader as many previous studies, such as by Yilmaz and Shakil titled "Imran Khan: From Cricket Batsman to Populist Captain, or Faiz (2022), in her study titled "We Are on the Same Page: The Curious Case of Imran Khan's Populism in Pakistan, have claimed. This article argued that other than populism, he employed developmental policies such as job creation for middle and lower-income groups, educational reforms, housing schemes, and health insurance cards, which resonated well with various socio-economic demographics (See Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4). As a result of this mixed approach and his successful election campaigns, his party received 16.9 million votes, becoming the party with the highest votes in Pakistani history, following this victorious election, the party selected Imran Khan to be Prime Minister.

Imran Khan's electoral victory can be attributed to his campaign strategies and his ability to engage the youth and diverse socio-economic groups. He effectively resonated with younger voters' aspirations by emphasizing educational reforms and pledging job creation while appealing to middle and lower-income demographics. His policies focused on social welfare, instilling a sense of hope and empowerment among those who previously felt overlooked by earlier governments. This commitment to youth involvement enabled him to connect with a crucial voter group. Furthermore, Imran Khan's adept campaigning in areas dominated by opposition parties highlighted his political

acumen. He broadened his support beyond traditional strongholds by directly addressing the issues pertinent to these communities and customizing his message to align with their interests. This blend of populist messaging, such as exposing corruption, plus targeted policy measures facilitated the formation of a diverse coalition, demonstrating that effective leadership can transcend narrow narratives. Ultimately, the 2018 election exemplifies Imran Khan's comprehensive strategy, merging populism with developmental initiatives to achieve extensive electoral success, which worked for him in the form of an immense voter turnout.

This article discussed how Imran Khan used populism and other developmental strategic policy proposals to mobilize the voters. However, the question remains: to what extent could the media have been biased against Imran Khan compared with the opposition parties? Further study is needed to answer this question to understand more comprehensively how media dynamics framed political perception and voter behavior.

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**Abstract**

# Analyzing Imran Khan's Transformative Political Strategy through 2018 National Election Campaigns

Nehal KHAN

This article analyzes Imran Khan's 2018 national election campaign strategy by focusing on the rhetoric and themes he used to mobilize voters from diverse socio-economic groups, young electorate, and different regions in Pakistan. Imran Khan, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party leader who came to power in 2018, often characterized as a populist leader, strategically crafted an election campaign with themes deeply rooted in anti-corruption, governance reforms, nationalism, and economic revival.

Throughout his speeches, he repeatedly emphasized the need to eliminate corruption, marking it as the primary cause of Pakistan's economic and social challenges. His use of linguistic patterns played a significant role in delivering direct and clear messages, often calling for a Naya Pakistan (New Pakistan) free from the influence of corrupt elites. Imran Khan's speeches also highlighted a sense of nationalism and sovereignty, using terms like self-reliance to appeal to voters frustrated with years-long external influences within the domestic political mechanism. His focus on economic reforms was promoted through the promises of job creation, poverty reduction, and a need for social and economic justice systems to attract the middle and lower-middle groups, particularly in urban areas.

By analyzing the themes used in Imran Khan's speeches during the 2018 national election campaigns, this article investigates how Imran Khan's approach was not merely a populist discourse as claimed by many previous studies but was more of a mixture of populist and developmental approaches. To further investigate the effectiveness of his discourse, this article delves into the statistical data from election results and surveys from Pakistan's 2018 national elections.

**Keywords:** Naya-Pakistan, anti-corruption, economic justice, elections, populism.