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The Rise of Religious Populism: A Case Study of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), founded in 2015, has emerged as a prominent force in Pakistan's religious-political landscape. Rooted in the Barelvi school of thought, the party gained national recognition through its mobilization around the protection of blasphemy laws and the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (Finality of Prophethood). This study examines TLP as a case of religious populism, analyzing how it combines religious symbolism, anti-elite rhetoric, and street agitation to mobilize public support. Unlike traditional religious parties, TLP institutionalized protest politics as a central strategy to influence state policy and political discourse. Using qualitative methods, including discourse analysis and historical review, this research explores TLP's ideological foundations, protest movements, and electoral performance. The study argues that TLP has significantly reshaped Pakistan's political environment by strengthening religious populist narratives and challenging democratic institutions. It contributes to understanding the evolving relationship between religion, populism, and state authority in Pakistan's contemporary politics.

Key Words: Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Religious Populism, Barelvi Movement, Blasphemy Laws, Protest Politics, Khatm-e-Nabuwwat, Political Islam, Pakistan Politics

Introduction

Religion has always played a central role in Pakistan's political identity. Since independence, various religious parties have sought to influence the state's ideological and legislative direction. However, the emergence of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) marks a new phase in religious politics characterized by populist mobilization, emotional religiosity, and street agitation.

Founded in 2015 following the execution of Mumtaz Qadri—the assassin of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer—TLP quickly transformed from a pressure group into a political



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party. The movement capitalized on widespread religious sentiments, particularly among Barelvi communities, who historically felt politically marginalized compared to Deobandi and Jamaat-e-Islami groups.

TLP's rise reflects the global phenomenon of populism, where leaders claim to represent the "true people" against corrupt elites. However, in Pakistan's context, this populism is religiously framed. The party portrays itself as the guardian of Islamic identity, accusing political elites of compromising religious principles.

This study explores how TLP functions as a vehicle of religious populism and examines its impact on Pakistan's democratic institutions, political culture, and governance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in promoting and institutionalizing religious populism in Pakistan.

Sub-Objectives

To examine the ideological foundations of TLP.

To analyze TLP's protest politics and mobilization strategies.

To assess TLP's electoral performance and political influence.

To evaluate the impact of TLP on Pakistan's democratic and political system.

Research Questions

How does TLP represent religious populism in Pakistan?

What strategies does TLP use to mobilize public support?

How has TLP influenced Pakistan's political and democratic institutions?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides insight into the transformation of religious politics in Pakistan. Unlike traditional Islamist parties that focused primarily on parliamentary politics, TLP has institutionalized street power and protest as primary political tools. Understanding TLP helps scholars analyze the broader trends of populism, radicalization, and religious mobilization in Pakistan. The study is useful for researchers, policymakers, and political analysts examining the challenges facing democratic governance in religiously polarized societies.

Sources and Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and adopts analytical and descriptive approaches to examine the role of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in religious populism in Pakistan. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary sources include the official party manifestos of TLP, speeches and public statements of its key leaders such as Khadim Hussain Rizvi and Saad Rizvi, government notifications and agreements made between the state and TLP during various protest movements, and electoral data obtained from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). These sources provide direct insight into the party's ideology, strategies, and political activities. Secondary sources consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspaper reports, research papers on religious populism and political Islam, and scholarly works analyzing Pakistan's religious and political dynamics. By integrating these sources, the study offers a detailed and balanced analysis of TLP's emergence, mobilization strategies, and broader political impact.

Review of Literature

Scholars studying Pakistan's political development have extensively discussed the



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relationship between religion and political mobilization. Ayesha Jalal explains that Islam has historically been used by political elites to establish legitimacy and mobilize public support, which gradually created fertile ground for religious populist movements in Pakistan (Jalal, 2014). Similarly, Hassan Abbas highlights the growth of religious extremism and argues that inconsistent state policies toward religious groups enabled their political expansion and normalization in mainstream politics (Abbas, 2005). Khaled Ahmed provides a detailed analysis of sectarian dynamics in Pakistan, emphasizing that the Barelvi sect traditionally remained less militant and politically passive; however, in recent years, groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have transformed this tradition by introducing aggressive political activism centered on religious identity (Ahmed, 2011). Christophe Jaffrelot examines identity politics and nationalism in Pakistan, arguing that religion remains a major factor in shaping political narratives and public mobilization (Jaffrelot, 2002). Jan-Werner Müller defines populism as a moralistic political imagination that divides society between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” which provides an important theoretical framework for analyzing TLP’s rhetoric and political strategy (Müller, 2016).

Recent empirical studies further explore TLP as a modern example of religious populism in Pakistan. Scholars argue that TLP constructs itself as the representative of the “true Muslim public” while portraying political elites as anti-Islamic forces threatening religious values (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Research also indicates that TLP politicizes issues such as Hurmat-e-Rasool (honor of the Prophet) and Khatm-e-Nabuwwat to create emotional and ideological appeal among supporters, which contributes to societal radicalization and increased religious polarization (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Another study highlights how TLP successfully mobilized the Barelvi sect into organized political activism, marking a significant shift in sectarian political participation in Pakistan (Ijaz, 2025). Furthermore, Sabat, Shoaib, and Qadar argue that TLP’s leadership effectively used religious symbolism and charismatic authority to mobilize followers and convert street power into electoral success (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020). Despite these contributions, scholars note that literature on TLP remains limited and lacks comprehensive analysis of its long-term implications for Pakistan’s democratic structure, creating an important research gap addressed by this study (Khadim, 2025).

Emergence of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan emerged as a significant political force following the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in 2011, which highlighted the political sensitivity of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. The execution of Mumtaz Qadri in 2016 further intensified religious mobilization and became a rallying point for the formation of TLP under the leadership of Khadim Hussain Rizvi (Ijaz, 2025). The party gained national prominence during the Faizabad sit-in in 2017, which demonstrated its ability to paralyze major cities and pressure the government into accepting its demands (Khadim, 2025). Subsequent protests related to the Asia Bibi verdict in 2018 and demonstrations against French cartoons in 2020–2021 strengthened TLP’s image as a powerful religious protest movement (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). These events transformed TLP from a sectarian religious movement into a nationally recognized political party with significant electoral and street power (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020).

TLP’s Ideological Foundations

TLP’s ideological foundation is rooted in Barelvi Sunni Islam and focuses primarily on protecting blasphemy laws and the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat. Scholars argue that



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TLP's ideology is largely symbolic and emotionally driven rather than policy-oriented, emphasizing religious identity and moral issues instead of governance or economic reforms (Ijaz, 2025). Research also suggests that TLP uses emotionally charged religious narratives to strengthen collective identity among supporters, which enhances mobilization and political participation (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Studies indicate that TLP's ideological agenda is closely linked with religious symbolism and cultural identity, making it highly influential in shaping political discourse in Pakistan (Khadim, 2025).

Protest Politics and Street Power

TLP has institutionalized protest politics as a central tool for negotiation with the state. The Faizabad sit-in of 2017 forced the resignation of the Federal Law Minister, demonstrating TLP's ability to influence government decisions through mass mobilization (Khadim, 2025). Nationwide protests during the Asia Bibi case challenged judicial authority and highlighted tensions between religious groups and state institutions (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Similarly, protests demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador in 2021 illustrated TLP's capacity to shape foreign policy debates through public pressure (Ijaz, 2025). Scholars argue that such protest politics represent a populist challenge to institutional authority and reflect the growing power of religious street movements in Pakistan (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020).

Electoral Performance and Political Influence

TLP's electoral participation further strengthened its political presence. During the 2018 general elections, the party secured over two million votes and emerged as a significant political force in Punjab, despite winning limited parliamentary seats (Khadim, 2025). Studies suggest that TLP's electoral success was largely driven by blasphemy politics, sectarian identity, and effective grassroots mobilization (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020). Research also indicates that TLP's electoral participation influenced mainstream political parties, forcing them to adopt stricter religious positions to maintain voter support (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Although TLP's parliamentary representation remains limited, its electoral performance significantly altered Pakistan's political competition and ideological discourse (Khadim, 2025).

Impact on Democratic Institutions

TLP's rise has had major implications for Pakistan's democratic institutions. Scholars argue that the party frequently challenges judicial decisions, particularly in blasphemy-related cases, which undermines the authority of courts (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). TLP's protests have also pressured the executive branch to negotiate under public pressure, weakening state authority and governance mechanisms (Ijaz, 2025). Additionally, the party's influence on legislative debates has pushed mainstream political parties toward adopting religious populist rhetoric to maintain political relevance (Khadim, 2025). Some studies suggest that TLP's activities expose weaknesses in Pakistan's civil-military and political governance structures, highlighting institutional fragility (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020).

Comparison with Other Religious Parties

Compared with traditional religious parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), TLP relies more heavily on emotional mobilization and street agitation rather than structured political programs or parliamentary strategies (Ijaz, 2025).



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While JI and JUI-F focus on ideological Islamism and parliamentary participation, TLP emphasizes symbolic religious issues and protest politics to maintain influence (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Scholars argue that TLP represents a new form of religious populism that prioritizes emotional religious narratives over policy-based political agendas (Khadim, 2025).

Challenges and Implications

Despite its rapid rise, TLP faces several challenges. Leadership crises emerged after the death of Khadim Hussain Rizvi, raising questions about organizational stability and future direction (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020). Government crackdowns, bans, and security operations have also limited TLP's political activities and public mobilization (Ijaz, 2025). Additionally, scholars highlight the party's limited policy agenda and dependence on religious issues, which restrict its ability to function as a comprehensive governing party (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). Internal factionalism and ideological rigidity further pose long-term challenges to the party's sustainability (Khadim, 2025). The rise of TLP reflects the growing influence of identity-based politics and increasing religio-political polarization in Pakistan. Scholars argue that the party represents a shift from traditional ideological Islamism toward populist religious activism focused on symbolic religious identity (Sial, Rana & Zahid, 2022). TLP also highlights the declining authority of democratic institutions and the increasing role of street power in political decision-making (Ijaz, 2025). Overall, the party's emergence signals significant changes in Pakistan's political landscape, emphasizing emotional religious mobilization as a major factor in contemporary politics (Khadim, 2025).

Conclusion

The rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) represents a significant development in Pakistan's contemporary political landscape and reflects the growing influence of religious populism in the country. By combining emotionally charged religious narratives with populist rhetoric, TLP has successfully mobilized large segments of society around issues such as blasphemy laws and Khatm-e-Nabuwwat. The party presents itself as the true representative of the "faithful people" while portraying political elites as corrupt and anti-Islamic, thereby reinforcing a classic populist divide between the pure public and the immoral elite.

TLP's strategy of protest politics and street mobilization has enabled it to exert pressure on state institutions, influence public discourse, and compel governments to negotiate its demands. Although its parliamentary representation remains limited, its electoral performance and ability to mobilize mass protests demonstrate substantial political influence. The party has also reshaped sectarian dynamics by transforming the traditionally non-confrontational Barelvi movement into an organized and assertive political force.

However, TLP's rise poses serious challenges to democratic governance and institutional stability in Pakistan. Its frequent confrontation with judicial decisions, reliance on street power, and emphasis on symbolic religious issues rather than comprehensive policy agendas raise concerns about democratic consolidation and rule of law. At the same time, the state's inconsistent response to TLP highlights structural weaknesses within Pakistan's political and governance systems.

Overall, the emergence of TLP illustrates the deep entrenchment of religion in Pakistan's political sphere and signals a broader shift toward identity-based and emotionally driven politics. Understanding TLP through the lens of religious populism provides valuable insight into the changing dynamics of political mobilization, democratic institutions, and



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ideological competition in Pakistan.

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