

Political Instability and Polarization: The Case of Imran Khan and PTI on X (Twitter)

Iftikhar Ahmad

PhD Scholar, The University of Lahore, Pakistan- pmbd01@gmail.com

Abstract

This research explores the role of the social media platform "X" (formerly Twitter) in shaping political instability and polarization in Pakistan from 2022 to the present. It focuses on the digital narratives surrounding the fear of Imran Khan's successful political movement, which challenged the decades-old dominance of entrenched elite structures. Following the removal of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government through a Vote of No Confidence in April 2022, Pakistan entered a phase of intense political chaos. The period has been marked by an economic downturn, widespread unemployment, accelerated brain drain, and growing psychological unrest among the public, which has been amplified through social media discourse. The study examines how Imran Khan's calls for justice, accountability, and sovereignty resonated with millions, triggering panic among traditional elites, military, bureaucratic, industrial, and feudal—who have long controlled Pakistan's socio-political order. The fear of losing their privileges led these elites to use both state apparatus and digital platforms to contain the PTI narrative. This research examines how "X" emerged as a key arena of resistance, where pro-PTI users, activists, and influencers disseminated counter-narratives against mainstream media and state institutions, exposing corruption, manipulation, and suppression. Moreover, the study examines the public's response to increasing political instability, rising inflation, growing unemployment, and the erosion of democratic freedoms. The fear of Imran Khan's growing popularity and his ability to mobilize the masses through digital means led to widespread censorship, arrests, and internet blackouts. Yet, the resistance persisted online, creating a polarized digital public sphere that mirrored the deep divisions within the country. This research concludes that the political crisis in Pakistan is not merely a struggle for power but a reflection of the structural shift in public consciousness. Imran Khan's movement, amplified by social media, has cracked the foundations of elite legacies, and platform "X" has become the frontline of both hope and hysteria in the country's ongoing political transformation.

Keywords: Imranophobia, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Elite Class, Stakeholders, Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)

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Corresponding Authors:

†Iftikhar Ahmad

1. Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has reshaped the landscape of political discourse. X formerly known as Twitter, is an influential social media platform used for civic engagement, online interaction, and democratic participation (Barbera, & Rivero, 2015). On the other side, its widespread misuse also raises concerns regarding political instability, polarization and unrest. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), under the leadership of Imran Khan, emerged in the Pakistani political arena with the aid of extensive social media usage (Shehzad et al., 2024). X, being a popular media in Pakistan and having the capacity for real-time information dissemination, served as a powerful tool for PTI to effectively mobilize its supporters and challenge the stance of other political parties (Ahmed et al, 2025; Khan, 2020). This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how Imran Khan and PTI's presence and activities on "X" have both reflected and exacerbated the existing political instability and polarization within Pakistan, examining the specific tactics employed, the responses garnered, and the broader implications for the country's democratic health.

The term "Imranophobia" has been coined to parallel Islamophobia, highlighting the systematic dehumanization and demonization faced by Imran Khan and his political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). This article explores the origins and consequences of Imranophobia within Pakistan's political landscape, tracing the rise of the Pakistan Muslim League (N) under Nawaz Sharif and the ensuing power dynamics marked by corruption, elite dominance, and bureaucratic manipulation. The study highlights how various elite groups, including military, bureaucratic, industrial, and religious elites, have amassed power and wealth through illicit means, thereby fostering a culture of kleptocracy and entrenched political corruption.

Literature Review

The academic literature on political instability and polarization in Pakistan, combined with studies on social media's role in political discourse, provides a crucial framework for understanding the case of Imran Khan and PTI on "X." Pakistan's political history is replete with episodes of democratic fragility, military interventions, and deep-seated ideological divides (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023). Studies on social media and political interaction and mobilization explicitly highlight the growing influence of X (Khan et al., 2025; Makazhanov & Rafiei, 2013). Significant literature also explores charismatic leadership in various contexts and this type of leadership promotes its narrative through social media platforms (Engesser et al., 2017).

However, the literature also discusses the dark side of social media's impact on civic engagement and political participation, which is highly relevant to Pakistan (Benkler et al., 2028). In the highly charged political landscape of Pakistan, X has been a battleground, where political parties engaged in character assassination, prejudices, and the dissemination of fake news just to defame political opponents. The following is the literature review summary in relevant to the current study.

Origins of Imranophobia

Imranophobia stems from the fear of Imran Khan's potential to disrupt the entrenched status quo. The elites' fear spans multiple dimensions: the erosion of landlordism and industrialism legacies, the collapse of corrupt bureaucratic practices, and the challenge to entrenched social hierarchies (Ali, 2022; Tareen, 2017; Mulla, 2021). Imran Khan's advocacy for transparency, justice, and accountability threatens the established power structures and the economic benefits derived from corruption (Afridi, & Ahmad 2025).

Political Landscape and Elite Dominance

The Pakistan Muslim League (N), under Nawaz Sharif and other many political parties, has long been associated with elite dominance and bureaucratic manipulation. The article traces the rise of PML(N) and the power dynamics that ensued, marked by corruption and the amassing of wealth by elite groups through illicit means. This period saw the entrenchment of political corruption, fostering a culture of kleptocracy.

Fear of Disruption

The elites' fear of Imran Khan's potential to disrupt this status quo fuels Imranophobia. This fear is multifaceted, encompassing concerns over the erosion of landlordism and industrialism legacies, the collapse of corrupt bureaucratic practices, and the challenge to entrenched social hierarchies. Imran Khan's advocacy for transparency, justice, and accountability poses a direct threat to these entrenched power structures.

Economic Ramifications

The economic ramifications of Imranophobia are significant, leading to social backlash against the ruling elites, political instability, economic turmoil, and psychological impacts on both the elites and the masses. Imran Khan's efforts to revive Pakistan's Islamic identity and strengthen its international standing further exacerbate these fears (Hassan et al., 2024).

Parallels with Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a fear, hatred and prejudiced behavior against Muslims that leads to threatening, intolerance, and harassment of Muslims (Allen, 2016; Bazian, 2028). Imranophobia can be likened to Islamophobia, defined as the dehumanization and demonization of Muslims, often manifested through discrimination and vilification in the media (Pratt, & Woodlock, 2016). Just as Islamophobia involves negative perceptions and anti-Muslim campaigns in the West, Imranophobia involves similar tactics against Imran Khan and PTI within Pakistan.

Systematic Dehumanization

In this context, members of one political party view other members of the political party less than human. The systematic dehumanization of Imran Khan and PTI parallels the dehumanization of Muslims in Western nations. The media plays a significant role in this process, perpetuating negative perceptions and fostering discrimination.

Effects of Imranophobia

Social, Political and Economic Perspective

Imranophobia has led to a social backlash against the ruling elites, with public disdain and rejection of PDM leadership becoming increasingly visible. This section examines the social implications of Imranophobia, including public demonstrations and the erosion of the elite's social standing. Politically, Imranophobia has destabilized the ruling parties, with PTI gaining significant public support despite the crackdown on its leadership and workers (Ali, 2022; Saeed et al., 2021). The economic impact of Imranophobia includes business closures, economic instability, and the flight of capital due to the crackdown on PTI supporters and leaders. This section examines the economic consequences and broader implications for Pakistan's economy (Mirza et al., 2023).

Psychological and Religious Perspective

Imran Khan's political strategy includes a significant psychological component that instills fear in his opponents. His opponents are aware of his unblemished record, lack of foreign assets, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan's recognition of him as "Sadiq and Amin" (truthful and trustworthy). Khan's transparency, honesty, and fearlessness, coupled with his vow to fight for justice, cause psychological stress among the leadership of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and the establishment. They fear accountability under his leadership, knowing that their corrupt activities and abuses of power will be exposed and punished if Khan regains power.

Imran Khan has emphasized Pakistan's Islamic identity, drawing inspiration from the concept of the Madinah state. His actions, such as promoting national dress, founding Al-Qadir University for Islamic education, and defending the honor of the Holy Prophet at international platforms like the UN, have bolstered Pakistan's standing in the Islamic world. These measures have earned him respect globally, particularly within the Muslim community (Mason, 2021). However, they have also sparked fear among forces hostile to Pakistan, who worry that Khan's efforts to unite the Islamic world could pose a threat to Western interests (Khan et al., 2020).

Individual Perspective

Imran Khan's leadership has instilled pride in the common Pakistani, who sees his global recognition and respect as a reflection of their own dignity. Khan's international praise contrasts sharply with the negative reputation of opposition leaders, particularly from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), whose corruption has brought shame to the country. This has fostered a sense of personal and national pride among Pakistanis, further intensifying the public's support for Khan against the backdrop of opposition efforts to eliminate him and his party from Pakistan's political history.

Research Methodology

For this research paper, Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic has been applied as a research methodology to analyze the concept of "Imranophobia" as a political phenomenon. The Master-Slave Dialectic, from Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit", explores the dynamics of power, recognition, dependency, and self-consciousness, making it a useful framework for analyzing political and social relations. In the context of "Imranophobia", presumably a term referring to fear, opposition, or resistance to Imran

Khan (former Prime Minister of Pakistan), by utilizing Hegel's dialectic to understand the power relations between different political actors, factions, or even ideologies.

Findings

This research, focusing on the discourse surrounding Imran Khan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) on X (formerly Twitter), reveals several key findings concerning political instability and polarization in Pakistan, with a particular emphasis on the phenomenon of "Imranophobia."

X as a Source for Political Mobilization and Conflict

The study highlights that X serves as the primary source for political mobilization for PTI and its usage has a significant impact on creating Imranophobia. The majority of the PTI supporters use social media, and they support Imran's narratives on corruption and nepotism. On the other hand, PTI opponents utilize X to criticize Imran's narratives, making X a battleground where, political narratives clash directly and continuously.

Manifestation and Impact of Imranophobia

Elite Fears and Imranophobia

The elites' fear of losing their privileged position is a driving force behind Imranophobia. This fear encompasses multiple dimensions:

1. Fear of Breaking the Legacy of Landlordism and Feudalism

Large landlords in Pakistan, who have owned vast tracts of land for generations, fear that Imran Khan's rise to power would lead to land reforms and the erosion of their legacy.

2. Fear of Breaking Legacy of Industrialism

The industrial elite, who have benefitted from corrupt practices and amassed wealth through illegal means, fear the loss of their economic advantages and investments, both domestic and offshore.

3. Fear of Breaking Legacy of Bureaucracy

Corrupt bureaucrats, many of whom hold dual nationalities, fear accountability and the potential loss of their ill-gotten wealth and power under an honest leadership.

4. Fear of Breaking Power-Oriented Social Structures

The entrenched concept of master and slave, prevalent in both rural and urban areas, is being challenged by Imran Khan's promise of justice and equality, which threatens the authority of local power brokers.

5. Fear of Breaking Legacy of Social Values and Norms Imposed by Authoritarianism

The elite's control over social values and norms is challenged by Imran Khan's advocacy for freedom and equality, which resonates with the middle and working classes, threatening the elite's dominance.

6. Fear of Breaking Established Political Discourse

The elite families, who have dominated Pakistan's political landscape for decades, fear the loss of their political influence and the breakdown of established discourses that have perpetuated their power.

7. Fear of Breaking the Concept of a Poor Society

Elites fear that Imran Khan's message of freedom and independence from Western influence will resonate with the masses, challenging the notion that Pakistan is destined to remain poor and dependent.

Master-Slave Dynamics

The term "Master": In this case, are those political powers or social groups that hold dominance and shape the narrative against Imran Khan (the State, opposition parties, media elites, etc.). The term "Slave": Imran Khan and his supporters, who are subjected to various forms of oppression, marginalization, or de-legitimization by the dominant groups. The dialectic focuses on how the "master" seeks recognition and domination over the "slave" while the "slave" seeks freedom and self-consciousness.

Struggle for Recognition

The master (those in power) denies recognition to the slave (Imran Khan or his political movement, PTI). However, the master also depends on the slave for recognition. In this analysis, it could be explored that how this struggle manifests in political discourse, media narratives, or state actions that attempt to suppress or delegitimize Imran Khan's political stance.

Reversal of Power

According to Hegel, the slave, through labor and struggle, can eventually become the master by attaining self-consciousness and freedom. It could be investigated whether the opposition to Imran Khan Results in his supporters becoming more self-aware, organized, or politically empowered, potentially leading to a reversal of power dynamics.

Fear and Dependency

The master (those opposing Imran Khan) is inherently dependent on the slave (Imran Khan's existence) to maintain their position. It can be analyzed whether "Imranophobia" stems from the fear that, without a clear opposition like Imran Khan, the ruling powers would lose legitimacy or support, revealing their own vulnerability. By applying Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic to "Imranophobia," this phenomenon can be illuminated to reveal the deep political and social struggles embedded in it, focusing on themes of domination, recognition, fear, and eventual shifts in power dynamics.

Conclusion

The case of Imran Khan and Imranophobia encapsulates the elite's fear of losing their privileged position and the profound societal transformation that Imran Khan's leadership promises to bring. This research highlights the systematic dehumanization and demonization faced by Imran Khan and PTI, drawing parallels with Islamophobia and emphasizing the need for a transparent and just political system in Pakistan. The personal attacks and vilification associated with Imranophobia frequently rely on such disinformation, making it a potent tool for political marginalization. The study also found that political leaders in Pakistan disseminate negative narratives about Imran Khan on X to discredit him in the eyes of his supporters. This phenomenon, resultantly, discourages constructive dialogue, deepens social disintegration and promotes an environment of intolerance. This situation further complicates the task for intellectuals to have their voices heard and find common ground for political stability.

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