



RELIGIOUS POPULISM IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF TAHREEK-E-LABBAIK PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper explores the drivers of religious populism in Pakistan. The first part of the study discusses the emergence of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) based on a religious populist appeal that discursively constructs them 'Pure People' against the 'Corrupt Elite'. In the second part, drawing upon the Social Movement Theory (SMT), this study explains how TLP attracts people into their fold by subjectively representing the reality – the unfolding of politics in Pakistan and how it securitizes the Hurmat-e-Rasool (honor of the Prophet) and Khatam-e-Nabuwwat (finality of the Prophet) by using certain frames for agitational politics. Furthermore, it also analyses how TLP uses the leadership cult – woven around a guardian of the Prophet's honour – to construct a persuasive narrative around the Khatam-e-Nabuwwat for their political support base. Finally, this study concludes how the extreme politicization of Hurmat-e-Rasool and Khatam-e-Nabuwwat by TLP leads to the radicalization of society in Pakistan.

Keywords: Tehreek-e-Labbaik, Populism, Hurmat-e-Rasool, Khatam-e-Nabuwwat, Construction, Securitization.



Introduction

In recent years, the world witnessed the rise of populism in mainstream politics, causing democratic recession and exclusivism in societies. Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Marine Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry in Germany, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise in Turkey are a few examples to cite. Societies, where traditional politics fail to deliver economic promises, are vulnerable to exploitation by populist leaders, wherein they represent themselves as the messiah of the masses and pledge to deliver the solution to public grievances. Pakistan is no exception; it has also experienced exclusivism, however, different in nature and conduct – the religious one. Religious rhetoric is more persuasive than a political one and easily attracts people closer to the narrative authority. People from a conservative society are even more vulnerable to religious appeal.

Pakistan is located in South Asia, with a more than 2600 kilometers of border with conflict-ridden Afghanistan – a country that hosted the global Jihad against the godless Communism in the later phase of the Cold War in 1980, the Civil war in the early 1990s, Talibanization in the late 1990s, and US-led invasion in the aftermath of 9/11. These developments raised the spectre of the religious figure in the region (Zahid, 2020). In the presence of socio-political and economic disparities and religious conservatism, Pakistan presented a perfect mix to be exploited by a populist with religious credentials. This study defines religious populism as “an approach/method of conducting politics that provoke the sentiments of the aggrieved (with socio-political grievances) people based on subjective interpretation of the politics, religion, and history in an absolute and critical manner and prescribe the religious solution of the political problems” and discusses the drivers of the religious populism in Pakistan.

The rise of the TLP in Pakistan is the result of regional geopolitics and the state's role in using religion (Islam) for national security, identity crisis at the national level, domestic socio-economic disparities, and state institutions' preference for political maneuvering. Historically, the state disproportionately supported the *Deobandis*¹ in the domestic sphere leaving behind the largest (in number) sect – the *Barelvis*², aggrieved and disgruntled. This is also noteworthy that the *Barelvis* have been politically least active in Pakistan up till the 2010s. However, the famous Asiya Bibi (accused of blasphemy) case and resultant assassination of Governor Punjab, Salman Taseer, by his security guard – Mumtaz Qadri, proved a catalyst for the political activism and assertive rise of the *Barelvis* in Pakistan.

¹ Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith believe in the pristine of Islam, both groups actively took part in Afghan War (that was promoted for geostrategic purposes by the Western/Muslim block in the last phase of the cold war against the Soviets)

² Barelvis belong to the Sunni Hanafi school of thoughts who align themselves with Sufism – a South Asian version of Islam, which is ritualistic opposed to Deobandis – more ideological that demands duties,



This paper uses SMT and explains how Molana Khadim Hussain Rizvi's TLP mobilized the country's lower middle and poor masses by securitizing the *Hurmat-e-Rasool* and *Khatam-e-Nabuwwat* and TLP exercised a monopoly over the said concepts of Islam by presenting itself as the sole custodian and guardian of the faith – Islam.

Definitional Dilemma

Populism is a contested term that demands a contextual and time-space-specific definition. However, it is popularly defined as a “political program or movement that champion or claim champion the common person usually by favorable or contrast with the real or perceived establishment (Munroe, 2022).” It has two variants: left and right—the left deals with the public interest, whereas the latter deal with state interests. Nevertheless, the said definition does not substantially explain the understudied phenomenon; therefore, the study has developed the above-mentioned working definition to comprehend the emergence of TLP holistically. Based on the definition, those religious groups alienated from the mainstream desire to reconstitute the social order with revisionist rigor. For that, an ‘other’ is discursively constructed out of the opponents through the subjective interpretation of history, religion, and politics with absolutist reasoning and importing historical analogies. That social practice, as a result, brings “pure people” versus the “corrupt elite” equation to the fore for public consumption (Ferguson, 2017).

Conceptual Framework: Theorizing the Rise of TLP

To demystify the complex phenomenon of religious populism, SMT has been employed as the theoretical framework. SMT revolves around the notion that informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity mobilize masses on conflictual issues through various and frequent protests. SMT came into the limelight when it systematically explained the ongoing protests on civil rights, nuclear-free, feminism, and the green movement in Europe and USA in 1950s and 1960s (Mueller, 1992, p. 5-6; Wiktorowicz, 2003).

SMT also explains the escapist coping mechanism that emerges when the state completely ignores the voices and grievances of one group, either deliberately or unwittingly, and fails to address that group's alienation (Fox, 1999, p 119-120). This exactly happened when the *Barelvis* faced alienation; despite being the majority, they were ignored, and *Deobandis* enjoyed political power under state patronage. Minkenberg's hybrid political approach helps the audience to distinguish how TLP's journey as a group ended in a movement. Applying his approach to TLP makes the latter a coalition of activism that arises from the social movement and tries to apply the organization and strategic practice of the social movement into the political arena (Minkenberg, 2019, p 465-466). With their massive support base, these groups turned movements can consolidate or oppose the status quo. When their identity (social, political, or religious) is



threatened, they mobilize the like-minded. TLP did the same and rose to the occasion through its activism when Mumtaz Qadri was sentenced to death by a court in Pakistan. It articulated its narrative with the persuasive appeal of defending the finality and the honor of the Prophet of Islam, coalesced its followers around the faith imperative, and embarked on a religious discourse that claimed a monopoly over the religious concepts (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615), demonized state institutions, and delegitimized the political opponents in a self-righteous way. This discourse is performative, radicalizes the masses, and undermines the judicial system manifested in the killings of many.

TLP entered into politics and diagnosed³ that the real problem in a Muslim country was to 'defend the honor and finality of the Prophet' and branded itself as causing a conflict with other political parties. Moreover, later on, prescribed the solution like the release of Mumtaz Qadri, the hanging of Asiya Bibi⁴, and the expulsion of the French Ambassador from Pakistan – an emotional and ideologically charged solution, far from reality but gave significant mobilization to their movement (Wiktorowicz, 2002)

Methodology

To answer questions: one, what are the factors that led to the rise of TLP?; second, How does TLP attract the masses into its sphere of ideology?; third, how does TLP rhetoric cause radicalization of society?; finally, how is radicalization manifested in Pakistani society? qualitative research method has been used to understand the drivers and mobilizing tactics of the TLP. This inquiry is based on the interpretative logic of a case study that involves a detailed description of the understudied case. Convenient sampling has been used because the access and sensitivity attached to the phenomenon were the major issues for the primary data sources. Therefore, secondary data sources (speeches, public talks, interviews, sermons, books – available open access) with inductive reasoning have been used for this research. Finally, qualitative content analysis has been used to draw certain findings/conclusions and make truth claims.

Literature Review

TLP organized itself around the *Barelvi* sect of Islam that emerged in the 19th century in the Indian city Bareilly – the birthplace of Imam Ahmed Raza Khan, the pioneer of this sect. *Barelvis'* interpretation of Islam has the largest number of followers in the subcontinent (Census, 2007). Barelvis are the decedents of *Hanafi Islam* – interpreted by Imam Abu Hanifa and bends

³ See for diagnostic framing Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Process and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment", *Annual Review Sociology*, 2000, 615.

⁴ Accused for blasphemy, who later was acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan.



towards Sufism based on peace and inclusivity. They consider themselves as revivers of pristine Islam, in line with the practices of the Holy Prophet, and thereby established *Ahl-e-Sunnat Wa Jamaat* the Muslim religious organization established in 1870, based on their beliefs like *Nur-Bashar*⁵, *Hazir-o-Nazir*⁶, and *Ilm-Ghaib*⁷ brought them into a conflict with *Deobandis* on the religious turf. Though both, former and later, belong to the same *Hanafi* jurisprudence, however, the *Deobandis* believe in a non-sainted and unadulterated version of Islam and show no signs of empathy towards *Sufism*.

The use of religious appeal for geopolitical gains during the last phase of the Cold War gave rise to the religious figure in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Supporting the Middle Eastern version of Islam – *Salafism*, a variant with a close affinity with *Deobandism*, became the geopolitical necessity for the containment of Communism (Lowenstein, 2016). Without an ideology, it was challenging to mobilize Afghans and Muslims at large to go against the Soviets in the American quest for global primacy. *Deobandi* Salafism, backed by the US, Saudi, and Pakistani defense complex, provided that ideology knit the battle of global primacy around (Hassan, 2013). Pakistan also witnessed a transformation – from a relatively open society to religious orthodoxy. Once *Jihadi Islam* was done with the Soviet enemy in Afghanistan, they locked horns with other rival dogmas at home in Pakistan. This is where these religious norms entrepreneurs started to contest for the righteousness of their cause (Nasr, 2000, p. 171).

Under General Zia-ul-Haq, state patronage of *Deobandis* sidelined the *Barelvis*. An ideological infrastructure was laid, and *Deobandi* madrassah grew to 1779 in 1988. However, *Barelvis* could only manage to have 717 in 1988 (Khan, 2017). This patronage was not only confined to the Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization. Even the 1990s saw continuity when *Sipah-e-Sahabah* and later on *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, influenced by *Deobandi* thoughts, attacked *Barelvi* Shrines and scholars (Asia Report, 2005). Since 1986, 671 *Barelvi* scholars have been killed by the *Deobandi* or *Deobandi*-inspired terrorists (S. Mehmood. 2018). With the rising victimization, *Barelvis* also decided to look for options to protect their dogmatic identity. *Sunni Tehrik*, a political party, was formed in 1991 to counter the *Deobandi* violence in 1990s. Saleem Qadri, the founder of *Sunni Tehreek* (ST) in Karachi, could not attract support from Baluchistan, KPK, and Punjab. ST provoked the *Barelvis* by using the slogan *Sunni he to Tehrik mein aa* (if you are a *Sunni*, join the ST) (Refworld, 2003). The situation worsened when Saleem Qadri was killed and claimed by the *Sipah-e-Sahabah* – an offshoot of *Deobandism*.

Similarly, in 2006, the suicide attack on the *Milad* rally in Nishtar Park Karachi killed almost all the ST leadership that silenced the ST for the next decade (Geo Report, 2006). Despite

⁵ Consider the Prophet the ray of the light of the Divine.

⁶ Consider the Prophet alive and present everywhere.

⁷ *Barelvis* believe the Prophet has the knowledge of coming events.



all efforts, ST as an organization and *Barelvis* as general could not inflict considerable damage to the ideological rivals – *Deobandis*. However, it received a massive death toll, as shown in the following table.

Attacks on the Sufi shrines since 2005

Date	Shrines	Perpetrator	Killed	Injured	Place
March 19, 2005	Pir Rakhel Shah	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Lej)	35	---	Jhal Magsi
May 27, 2005	Imam Bari	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	20	100	Islamabad
March 5, 2009	Rehman Baba	TTP	---	---	Peshawar
June 17, 2010	Golra Sharif	Ghazi Force	1	3	Islamabad
July 1, 2010	Data Darbar	TTP	37	---	Lahore
October 7, 2010	Abdullah Shah Ghazi	TTP	8	60	Karachi
October 25, 2010	Baba Farid	TTP	6	---	Pakpattan
March 7, 2011	Akhund Panju Baba	TTP	11	---	Nowshera
April 3, 2011	Sakhi Sarwar	TTP	50	---	D.G. Khan
June 21, 2012	Punj Peer	TTP	3	22	Peshawar
October 28, 2012	Kaka Sahib	TTP	3	25	Nowshera
December 11, 2012	Sheikh Nisa Baba	TTP	---	---	Khyber Agency
June 21, 2014	Baba Nangay Shah	Unknown	---	60	Islamabad
October 15, 2014	Abdul Qadus Shah	TTP	---	---	Peshawar
November 13, 2016	Shah Noorani	Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)	50	102	Khuzdar
February 17, 2017	Lal Shahbaz Qalandar	ISK	83	250	Sehwan

Table 1 source: *Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan* (Basit, 2020).



It is noteworthy that post-9/11 violence in Pakistan compelled the strategic elite to counterbalance violent *Deobandism* with pacifist *Barelvism* (Shahid & Ahmed, 2016). Allama Tahir ul Qadri and Ilyas Qadri appeared to be the face of *Barelvis*. President Musharraf established a Sufi advisory council destined to promote Sufism in the country as the anti-dote to *Talibanization* (Feur, 2015). Allama Tahir ul Qadri issued a *Fatwa* (decree) that declared the violence perpetrated by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and anti-Shia *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* as unIslamic (Qadri, 2010). Sunni Ittehad Council also established a forum of twenty *Barelvi* organizations and campaigned against terrorism (Khan, 2017).

The killing of Governor Punjab Salman Taseer by Mumtaz Qadri on the blasphemy became the catalyst for the social mobilization of *Barelvis*. This activism now had all the necessary ingredients and a conducive environment that eventually led to the rise of a movement called TLP on August 1, 2015, under the banner of '*Labbaik, Ya Rasool Allah*'.⁸ Five hundred scholars issued a *Fatwa* that hailed Mumtaz Qadri and declared him a "guardian of the honor of the Prophet (Gawakh, 2011)." Students would send red roses to *Mumtaz Qadri* on Valentine's Day during his days in prison (Express, February 14, 2011). After the execution of *Mumtaz Qadri* on February 29, 2016, all *Barelvi* organizations in Pakistan and the custodians of Sufi shrines in the country discussed the possibility of forming a united front under the banner of TLP. However, fearing the loss of identity, only few would appear to join hands with TLP. *Sirat-e-Mustaqeem*, led by Ashraf Jalali, and the *International Council of Barelvi*, led by Pir Afzal Qadri, are the two to mention (News, 2017).

TLP Enters the Electoral Political

According to the hybrid political approach, a party is inclined to be part of the system by contesting general elections to be part of the legislature or expressing their voice through legitimate protest cycles.⁹ TLP, like Jamaat Islami of Pakistan, Hamas of Palestine, and Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, retained the rigors of both; activism of movement and political participation of a political party (Darrag, 2016). All worked for social and religious causes before entering active politics.

In the case of religious parties in Pakistan, they have failed to make a mark through ballot power. In the electoral history of Pakistan, there are only two such occasions when they successfully translated their street power into electoral gains. In 1972 Mufti Mehmood allied with religious parties and formed a government in former North Western Frontier Province – now KPK;

⁸ TLP initially started as Tahreek Rihai Mumtaz Qadri, after his hanging it transformed into Tahreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah

⁹ In Hybrid Political Approach, parties are the part of system, contest election, in order to increase political mileage



similarly, in 2002 elections, religious parties formed an alliance – *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA) and formed governments in KP and Baluchistan (Refworld, 2004). The reason behind the poor performance of these religious parties is that voters of Pakistan are more inclined toward national parties than religious parties. Moreover, not based on intra-sect unity or religious unity, and on the other hand, political parties also play religious cards. That, too, affected the religious vote bank.

Nevertheless, religious parties have dominated the political landscape vis-à-vis mainstream political parties in the context of street power. Their supporters are more committed followers of leadership and more active in protest; therefore, religious parties adopted the hybrid political approach. Initially, TLP started with the “Free Mumtaz Qadari” slogan; after his hanging reoriented itself with “*Tahreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah*”, and after they had become popular, it registered itself as a party – Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (Supreme Court Verdict, 2013).¹⁰

This study analyzes the TLP into two phases: first, when it started agitational politics by sit-ins on public squares like Faizabad interchange, that blocked twin cities Islamabad and Rawalpindi, under the banner of “*Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah*” for claiming exclusive monopoly over the honour of the Prophet; second, transformed itself by entering the political spectrum political influence. TLP uses “*Khatam-e-Nabuwwat*” as the mainstay of its politics and got electoral support from the Sindh and Punjab provinces. In 2018 polls, they secured 2.2 million votes (ECP, 2018). Though they could not translate these votes into legislative seats because of their inexperience and lack of understanding of politics, they could only manage three seats from Karachi (ECP, 2013). Despite not making it to the legislative assembly, it has heralded a new era of religious politics by affecting the electoral base of other parties, especially PML- N and PTI in Punjab, along with PPP and MQM in Sindh (Ramachandran, 2021). TLP effectively communicated its message in public gatherings, raised funds, and successfully attracted mainstream political parties for seat adjustments. It is highly critical to the system and aims to maintain its distinct identity woven around the concepts of the *Hurmat-e-Rasool* and *Khatam-e-Nabuwwat* by proposing the death penalty to those who wish to amend the blasphemy law in Pakistan.¹¹ On the issue of the Finality of the Prophet, they consider *Ahmedis* – non-Muslim. Many wondered how had Khadim Rizvi (the late founding leader of TLP) galvanized that massive support within no time. The answer is that TLP’s support base comes from the downtrodden and poor segments of society, wherein religion provides solace to the economically marginalized and socially frustrated populace (Khalid, 2021). Furthermore, the mass mobilization for agitation in the name of the religion or its Prophet renders the exclusive monopoly as the defenders of the faith and honor of the Prophet.

¹⁰ Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned Asia Bibi's death sentence and released her from prison, 31 October 2018.

¹¹ For details, see the TLP’s political manifesto available at <http://tlyp.org/en/index.php/manifesto/>;



Narrative Framing by TLP

There are three critical components in TLP's narrative construction. Populist leaders construct the narrative based on the grievances of the people, and religious of them always resort to identity politics to give meaning to their politics. They juxtapose by using oppositional binaries and construct the identities on the discursive structures of 'Us' versus 'Them'. They construct the rivals as a threat to the religious values – to be defended. Similarly, TLP leadership constructed the mainstream parties, especially PMLN (their government hanged Mumtaz Qadri), a threat to Islam and Islamic values (Haider, 2016). This, in return, constructs them as the custodian of faith and and the religion as 'to be defended entity'. This self-serving identity-mediated construction places them as the most appropriate authority to interpret the religion and criminalizes whatever they oppose.

How many do the followers of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) love Him? The next call will make the public forget the history of the last 72 years. How dare France challenges one and a half billion Muslims and reviles the Prophet by caricaturing him? Alas, they (French) know there is no one to hold them accountable. The nation (Muslims) is looking for Umar Farooq (RA) and Siddique Akbar (RA) ... We are not scared of imprisonment. We are not scared of bullets. We have to rise. We have to rise against those who make the mockery of the Prophet ... We will rise to defend the honor of our Prophet (Rizvi, 2022).

Diagnostic Framing

TLP leadership identifies the problem and refers elite and other parties as to the source of the problem. TLP, which owes its existence to an event - the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri, who killed the alleged blasphemer Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, considers him [Qadri] a worthing cherishing 'Hero'. Its leadership maintains, "how a Muslim can bear the blasphemy of the beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it is better to die" (Khadim Rizvi, 2020).

TLP leaders securitized the Honor of the Prophet by constructing themselves as the defenders of the faith and custodians of the 'Hurmat-e-Rasool' and 'Khatam-e-Nabuwwat' – hence claiming the monopoly over these concepts at the same time constructing 'supporters of the blasphemy' who chose not to side with TLP. TLP leaders invited all *Barelvi* leaders across Pakistan to form a united platform, '*Tahreek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah*'. For them, the state did not stand with them; therefore, with the blasphemer. This juxtaposition otherizes the state and its institutions constructing the TLP 'for Islam' and state 'against Islam' on the 'us' versus 'them' discursive structures. This construction based on speech acts and other lexical resources constructs a faith imperative that requires the adherents to go against the state (Siddiqui, 2011). TLP leaders criticized not only the government approach but also those clerics who belonged to their own sect,



Dr Tahir ul Qadri, who had not aligned with them. Khadim Rizvi gave him a notorious name, said he was no longer a Barelvi and was a *Padari* (Pastor). Khadim Rizvi also alleged Tahir ul Qadri of receiving money from the poor Muslims in the name of the Prophet and failed to deliver when he was needed the most just to protect his Canadian nationality (K. Rizvi 2016). Religious Parties wanted the state to adopt a stern approach against what they perceived as the enemy of Islam. Knowing the limitations of a weak state like Pakistan in the polity of the nation states, this is very rational on their part; in the event of inaction by the state, they start their mobilization and act as a pseudo-state.

After the verdict of the Supreme Court on Asiya Bibi's blasphemy case, TLP leaders accused the elite of being non-Muslim. TLP leader Pir Afzal Qadri issued a fatwa holding the Prime Minister, Chief Justice, and Army Chief *Wajib-ul-Qatal* (liable to death) for their alleged support of Asiya in her acquittal. He nonetheless withdrew his fatwa and apologized (Bilal, 2019). During the recent encounters between TLP protesters and law enforcement agencies on the question of the expulsion of the French Ambassador, Khadim Rizvi questioned the ideological basis of the state:

We cannot forgive the enemies of the Prophet (PBUH). While traveling to Islamabad, I wondered whether we could send back the French Ambassador. [Alas] the Muslims living in France can protest, but in the state which was achieved in the name of Islam, the nation is not allowed to protest for the honor of the Prophet. Now, we have to ask a question about the type of leadership we have been led by for the last 72 years. Had Labbaik (TLP) been ruling the country, it would have executed them [blasphemers] (K. Rizvi, 2020).

Prognostic Framing

TLP prescribes a solution to the problem that is self-serving in outlook. As mentioned in the first frame, after demonizing the state and its institutions (including the then ruling party PML-N) TLP leadership proposes a solution; for instance, Khadim Rizvi accuses the government of being the stooge of the West and goes a step further, expressing his future intentions, "once we are in power we will treat them [West] with an iron fist" (K. Rizvi, 2020). Most of the time, they give emotive solutions but are far from practical. For instance, the firebrand Khadim Rizvi proposed to launch a missile attack against the USA and IMF if they ask Pakistan to pay back its loans "*Lo ji fer Aaya Je Ghauri* [Here comes the Ghauri missile to hit you]" (Arif, 2019).

However, damaging the social fabric, these violent solutions earn them a massive support base they use for political bargains with the state institutions and other political parties. TLP's manifesto recommends a death sentence for the one who suggests an amendment [in line with human rights] to the blasphemy laws. This weaponization of language, its use in the public square,



and its militarization of the political sphere have consequences for society – radicalizing youth in the name of religion. Like in Charsadda, a college student was absent for a long time, and when asked where he was, he replied that he was attending the Faizabad sit-in. This exchange of words led to the teacher's killing by the student on charges of blasphemy (Times, 2018). Later, it was found that the teacher also belonged to the TLP. TLP motivates its supporters and aggressively champions the cause of defending the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the finality of the Prophet (DW, April, 15, 2021). Khadim Rizvi often used the famous quote of Salah-ud-Din Ayubi, "how can I live a peaceful life in this world where blasphemers also live" (Nazeer Ahmed, 2007).

TLP termed its agitation as Jihad, constructing a faith imperative for Muslims to participate in the cause of Islam. Despite TLP's violent appeal, its leadership also kept on rendering lip service to the traditional pacifist tradition of *Barelvism*, citing *Hum darood ko man'na walay hain, barood walay nahi* (we are ideological, not violent).¹² Khadim Rizvi's frequent denunciation of contemporary *Sufism* for being too pacifist and apologetic is self-evident that it [TLP] no longer subscribed to traditional *Sufism*. He redefined the concept that suited his vision:

Today, we see these corrupt clerics spreading the wrong interpretation of *Sufism*. A person who believes in *Sufism* always propagates love, avoids conflict, and stays away from evil-doings. A *Sufi* is a pacifist and unknown to aggression and violence. No! A real *Sufi* does not tolerate the existence of the enemy of the Prophet PBUH; he neither preaches peace [all the time] nor renders services to the USA. One should not teach us [what *Sufism* is] and that Islam is the religion of peace (K. Rizvi, 2018).

Motivating Framing

TLP uses religious content, though a-historically, and identifies the problem and prescribes solutions subjectively with self-legitimizing discourse. They portray themselves as the custodian of the '*Khatam-e-Nabuwwat*' and '*Hurmat-e-Rasool*' and constructs an ideological imperative for the followers to sacrifice everything for the honor of the Prophet (Zaidi, 2020). They decontextualize the history, import historical figures, and recontextualize them into the present to construct new meanings that suit them. For instance, they import a notorious figure of Islam – *Yazid* and draw the identity of the government parallel to the *Yazid*. This adequation, in return, constructs them as 'defenders of Islam' like Imam Hussain and the revered Sahabah of that time (Sareen, 2021).

The following excerpt highlights how narrative authority constructs its own identity 'for the prophet' on 'for' and 'against' discursive structures that construct the government against the

¹² This statement used by different Barelvi scholars especially in "war in terror", gave identity themselves peaceful



Prophet. This juxtaposition disarticulated the government from the Muslim community and rearticulated with non-Muslims – bent on amending the blasphemy laws:

Tum ne dakah daala he hamare voton per, hum ne kya ehtijaj kiyah..., Kuch bi nai kiya..... sada tum ne [nai] rehna hain, Hazoor [Muhammad PBUH] ka din to aana hi aana he [You robbed us of our votes, we did not protest, we did nothing.... even if you live forever, the day of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) is approaching]. We will not allow the removal or amendment of the blasphemy law (Asghar, 2021, p. 66).

Moreover, TLP blamed the political elite for not going tough against the West just because of their political interest; basically, they are the stooges of the West. They used other historical figures Ilam Deen and Salah ud Din Ayubi, to give legitimacy to the narrative and mobilized supporters that follow the same path as their ancestors. Khadim Rizvi frequently quoted Allama Iqbal [national poet of Pakistan] on the death of Ilam Deen,¹³ *Tarkhana da munda bazi lay gya* [the carpenter's son outmatched us] (Ghazi Shaheed, 2006). Khadim Rizvi used phrases to construct that fighting for the cause of *Hurmat-e-Rasool* was complete Islam, and those who failed to act against the offenders – involved in blasphemy were the cowards (K. Rizvi, Nov., 11, 2020).

غلام ہیں، غلام ہیں
رسول کے غلام ہیں
غلامیء رسول میں موت بھی قبول ہے
جو ہو نہ عشق مصطفیٰ ﷺ تو زندگی فضول ہے

Translation:

We are the slaves of the Prophet, [and] even death is acceptable in abidance of the Prophet. Life without love for the Prophet is worthless.

TLP's Social Media Strategy: From a Word to the World

TLP leadership articulates the narrative for the construction of a self-serving social reality. Its followers use social media plate forms to disseminate the message. Pakistan is the fifth most populated country in the world, 63 percent of which is the youth, with an active social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Kamray, 2021). As an audience, social media users have expanded the TLP narrative spectrum – well beyond mosques and madrassas. Khadim Rizvi's speeches are found in their cell phones, wherein he persuades them to rise for the honor of the Prophet. TLP uses different hashtags that get retweeted by millions and have penetrating appeals.

¹³ Ilm Din was son of a carpenter, became a public figure when he killed a Hindu publisher Rajpal who published a book – Muslims believed blasphemous. He later on was hanged by the British Indian authorities.



For instance: #Labaik-Namoorsalatmarch (1.8M), #kltakmuaihdapurakaro(1.4M), #Jangowalanabikeamad (987k), #katilazamimrankhan (940k), #Kanoon-ayenkmuhafiz (1M).

This massive support base allows TLP to feed misinformation during the media blackouts during their sit-ins and strikes. They use social media to keep their followers updated. Ironically, during their agitation, TLP supporters beat the police officers and asked them to chant *Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah* to prove they were Muslims. In order to gain the sympathies of the masses, they inflate the threat by disarticulating the government from the body of Pakistani Muslims and rearticulate them with the (non-believer) West (Siddiq, 2020).

Pakistan government officially approached to twitter administration to close down the Twitter account of mainstream leadership of TLP leaders. However, Twitter refused this crackdown and declared it was against the freedom of speech (Express Nov., 04, 2018). TLP's use of social media, mobilizing supporters for violent protests and spreading messages outside the world portrayed a negative image of Pakistan – undermining Pakistan's efforts to get out of the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The eruption of this violence on the eve of FATF proceedings lessened the chances of Pakistan achieving the confidence of FATF committee. Pakistan's arch-rival, India, gets another justification to malign Pakistan on international forums. At the same time, hashtags like #Francsafeerkobhagao (expel the French Ambassador) threatened Pakistan's GSP status – a massive setback to the country's economy (Ejaz, 2021).

Graph of TLP users on Twitter

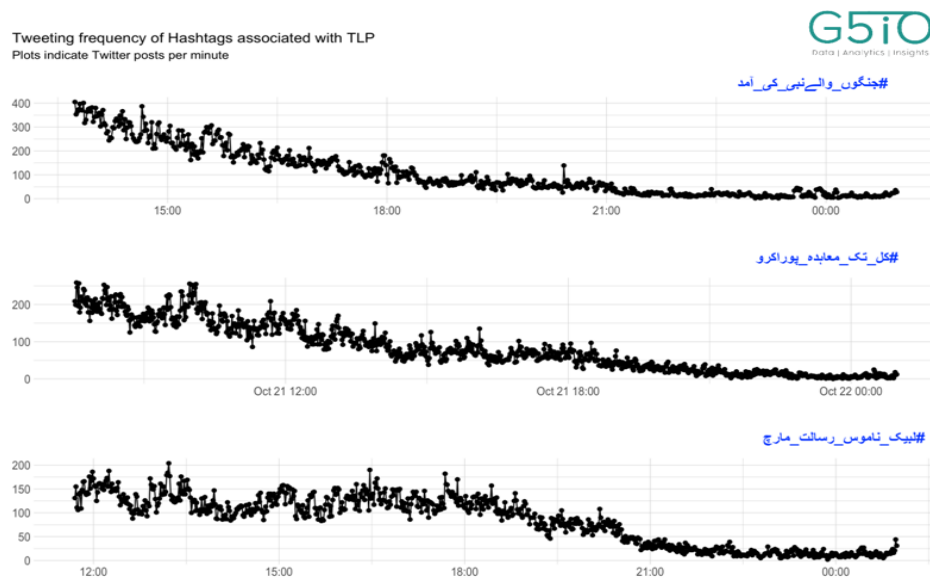


Table 2. Graph of TLP's Twitter users (Platform Manipulation, 2021).



Electoral Performance of TLP in 2018 Polls

TLP adopted both tendencies – as a party and a movement, so this heading analyzes the TLP electoral performance in the 2018 election. Using radical religious rhetoric, TLP gained momentum as a movement and got a good number of votes, especially from the two largest provinces of Pakistan – Punjab and Sindh. It successfully motivated people to show power through the ballot. According to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), TLP bagged almost 2.2 million votes and became the fifth-largest party in Pakistan ECP, 2018). According to the ECP, the result of 19 national assembly seats was altered by the TLP – causing severe damage to the electoral credentials of the Pakistan Muslim League N (PML-N). The data also reveals TLP's alliance with the runners-up would have turned the final results upside down, making the TLP – darling of Tehrik-e-Insaf and PML-N in Punjab. PTI Lahore and PML-N Lahore presidents visited Saad Rizvi on his release to make a case for future alliance.

The General election in 2018 was the first election in TLP's political life. Despite a disorganized campaign, party organization, and lack of understanding of constituency politics, it registered a heavy presence. It was the third largest party in Punjab, seventh in Sindh, eighth in KPK, and sixteenth in Balochistan (ECP, 2028). It can better capitalize in Punjab and Sindh with better strategy and political alliances. Its follower always voted for other mainstream parties like PML-N, PPP, and MQM in the past (Gallup, 2018). However, with radical religious rhetoric and securitization of *Khatam-e-Nabuwwat*, it can reclaim its voters back into its camp. According to the ECP figures of the 2018 election, 2 percent of TLP candidates got the second position, while 41 percent of candidates got the third position (Gallup, 2018).

TLP Votes by Provinces in 2018 Polls

Province	Votes	Percentage
Punjab	1, 712, 125	77%
Sindh	420, 619	19%
KPK	89,812	4%
Baluchistan	11,760	1%
Total	2,234,316	100%

Table 3. Source: Source <https://gallup.com.pk/post/32964> (Gallup, 2018).

Radical Manifestation of TLP Rhetoric

Every dogmatic movement based on absolutist argument always causes radicalization in society. Even in the highly developed world, like Western Europe and the United States, the development of Islamophobia resulted in Christ Church-like incidents. In conservative societies like Pakistan, these narratives stir the sentiments of ill-informed, politically inspired clergy-



dependent individuals, resulting in rejectionism and violence against the perceived source of the grievance. They use the Quranic verses and Ahadith and create the context that suits them. For instance, they use the following Hadith (saying of the Prophet):

مَنْ سَبَّ نَبِيًّا قُتِلَ وَمَنْ سَبَّ أَصْحَابَهُ جُلِدَ (الصارم المسلول، ص ٩٢)

Translation:

Those who revile the Prophet, be killed.

They use this Hadith to justify killing the blasphemer(s). This discourse, based on rejectionism, has radicalized the once pacifist, all-inclusive Barevis into violent ones. In *Khushab* city of Punjab, a bank guard killed the bank manager, alleging the latter of blasphemy (showing disrespect for the Namaz and not allowing the guard to perform Namaz). When the news was broke, the guard became an instant sensation – a religiously celebrated hero, doing the bid of Islam. People came onto the streets and cherished his act of ‘bravery’ and chanted the slogans ‘*Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah Labbaik*’. The charged crowd did not allow the police to arrest the killer. Later, it was found that the manager fired the guard from the job; the former used religion to settle his personal score with impunity. In a similar theocentric streak, a Sri Lankan factory manager Parantha Kumar, was killed by the mob in Sialkot on similar charges and context (Sadiq, 2021). The following table lists the details of the incidents:

Incidents of Violence by TLP affiliates/inspired (2011-2022)

NO	Date	Incident	Allegation
1	October 1, 2011	Murder of former Punjab governor late Salman Taseer	The murder of Taseer on Blasphemy charges
2	March 28, 2016	Sit-in in Islamabad red-zone on Mumtaz Qadari chehlum	The imposition of Sharia Law
3	January 31, 2017	Murder of a member of the Ahmadi community in Glasgow	Blasphemy accusation
4	November 2017	21-day sit-in that left six people dead and 200 injured	Amendment in the wording of the Kahtm-e-Nabuwat oath undertaken by members of the National Assembly



5	August 2018	The threat to Dutch Embassy in Islamabad over the blasphemous cartoon competition	The cartoon competition was canceled
6	November 6, 2018	Blasphemy-accused Christian woman Asiya Bibi release	Lock-down Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Karachi
7	November 7, 2018	TLP threatened to kill Dutch Ambassador to Pakistan, forcing the closure of the Dutch embassy	TLP members were angry over blasphemous tweets by the far-right politician Geert Wilders
8	November 18, 2020	Protest against the government not the expulsion of the Ambassador	TLP angry on Emanuel Macron's statement about Blasphemy
9	April 19, 2021	4 policemen were martyred and 250 injured	Protest on the arrest of Saad Rizvi and not full filled agreement
10	December 3, 2021	Manager of factory in Sialkot killed	Mob lynches Sri Lankan manager burn corpse over blasphemy allegation

Table 4. Compiled by the authors. Source: “Timeline of attacks on shrines in Pakistan,” Dawn, February 17, 2017. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1315263>

Conclusion

TLP is a religious populist political party that successfully retains the characteristics of a movement also. It is religious in appeal, re-constitutive in program, and revisionist in solution prescription. TLP conducts politics that provokes the sentiments of the aggrieved (with socio-political grievances) people based on subjective interpretation of the politics, religion, and history in an absolute and critical manner and prescribe the religious solution of the political unfolding in Pakistan. It has successfully attracted poor people who have been left behind in the political and economic processes of the society and convinced them that protecting the finality and honor of the Prophet is the faith imperative of the Muslims in Pakistan and TLP will deliver them economic



and political promises being the sole political party committed to protect the cherished '*Hurmat-e-Rasool*', and '*Khatam-e-Nabuwwat*' in Pakistan. They (TLP) only to be voted for the ideological obligation. TLP leadership, through its speeches constructs themselves an s 'pure' people against the 'Corrupt Elite (political) and in response re-appropriates a reverence that cannot be disregarded. TLP's identity mediated discourse is constructed in three phases: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivating phase. Where in TLP uses persuasive logic in their rhetoric to attract people into their sphere of ideology, that representations otherizes the political rivals that radicalizes the society, which is eventually manifested in their social practices.



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