

Journal of Politics and International Studies

Vol. 11, No. 2, July–December 2025, pp.45–55

Role of Civilizational Populism in Shaping Religious Othering: A Comparative Analysis of India and Pakistan

Saareena Asrar 

M.Phil Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Government College University, Lahore, Punjab-Pakistan

Corresponding Author: sareena.asrar@gmail.com

Dr. Sadia Mahmood Falki 

Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, LCWU Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: sadia.falki@lcwu.edu.pk

Abstract

Civilizational conflicts have dominated debate since Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," which argued that cultural and religious identities would define future wars. With the rise of populism often linked to authoritarian politics, claims of civilizational superiority are increasingly used to dismiss perspectives seen as contrary to dominant cultural narratives. Civilizational populism often divides societies into categories mainly virtuous 'people' and perceived 'enemies.' In India, its rise is visible in populist rhetoric and radical policies but also in the persistent framing of the state as the product of a broader civilizational project. In Pakistan, civilizational populism has historically been more symbolic, used to foster national integration amid ethnic assertions and demands for provincial autonomy. In both states, however, civilizational hostility is reinforced through societal indoctrination and the securitization of religious 'others,' portrayed as less human and unworthy of empathy. This embeds an imagination of the state as an extension of a singular civilization, damaging democratic norms and equal human rights. This research explores India's shift from national identity to civilizational self-definition & studies how civilizational imaginaries shape populist state identities in India and Pakistan, while exploring why civilizational memories fuel religious othering in both states.

Key Words: Civilization, India, Minorities, Othering, Pakistan, Populism, Religion.

Introduction

In South Asia, referring to religious terminologies is a common practice in political discourses. This often serves to shape identification of groups as 'us' versus 'them' to mobilize masses for political & electoral support. In the backdrop of two opposing constitutional paths in terms of determining the identity of state, the politics & societies of India (constitutionally a secular state) & Pakistan (constitutionally declared an Islamic state) are characterized by tendencies of majoritarian populism.

This research focuses that why despite having opposing constitutional discourses about the role of religion in the affair of these states; anti-religious minority rhetoric is quite prevalent in political discourses. The authoritative nature of these societies is largely shaped by their historical, socio-cultural experiences leading to civilizational assertions of superiority of respective religion to keep distinct & anti-thesis identities. The politics of hate & aggression are further reinforced by acute socio-economic divides & political instrumentalization of religion in both states which strengthened the trends of religious populism. However, the intensity and nature of religious antagonism is varied in both states. In India, the religious hate and discrimination penetrated into the policy level by defaultly involving state as a party to the conflict between religious majority and minorities due to the reason that the ruling party; BJP having strong religious orientations came into power since 2009. Though in Pakistan, while having a history of vigorous Islamization phases at both state and society level and asserting civilizational distinctiveness through education and text books, political elite remained tolerant and moderate towards religious minorities with an exception of military regime of General. Zia. The Pakistani brand of symbolic religious populism by former Prime ministers; Z.A. Bhutto and Imran Khan was not largely translated into aggression and politics of hate against religious minorities in Pakistan and remained confined to limited radical sections of society. Moreover, religious organization, parties and their associates in Pakistan never won substantial electoral support which restricted their violent religious othering to the limited audience. This research claims that despite having elements of civilizational superiority and frequent referral to religious languages in political discourses in both India and Pakistan, most populist rhetoric in Pakistan lacks an ideological inspiration as compared to populist religious discourse in India.

Populist governments are largely characterized by the economic impediments, antagonistic contestation of their political adversaries and authoritarian political approaches to overcome possible challenges to their legitimacy of power (Azam & Falki, 2021). The recurrent use of populist oratory to attract masses either for electoral gains, to discredit political opponents internally or externally is a prevalent tendency around the globe. Populism has grasped the attention of intellectuals and academia as growing intensity and variation of populist rhetoric has been observed in different political systems irrespective of their tagging as western or non-western and democratic or authoritarian. Civilizational Populist states have a tendency to create image of an enemy; either of a group, religion or a state while portraying the political and ideological differences as a battle between two clearly homogenous groups based on strong othering of good (us) and evil (them). Civilizational Populist states tend to outspread their populist rhetoric to their external interactions either deliberately or by default. Although the primary spectators of such populist oratory are generally the internal audience where disparagement of another state is proceeded to secure support and legitimacy of the domestic populist agenda. (Muller, 2016) explicates that once populist leaders come into power, they become reviled elite against which they were previously resisting. This emergent quandary leads the populists in power to keep on rallying and polarizing masses to find new means and ways to secure popular support. The literature on 'rally-around-the-flag-effect' provides that external threat perceptions and foreign policy issues help populists to gather domestic popular support more advantageously. This directs our attention that when populists are in power, the likelihood of having stronger link between foreign policy and domestic issues exaggerates. The underlying reason of this propensity is that populists primarily emerge in response to some international factors and events. Three key factors are generally listed in literature on populism in response of which populist discourses are generally shaped. These are adverse alleged or real consequences of globalization, role of international financial regimes and westernization or euro-centralism (Destradi, 2022).

Literature Review

(EuropeanCenterforPopulismStudies, 2023) In their article *Civilizational Populism around the World*, explore how populist leaders across different regions use civilizational narratives to define identity and rally political support. It shows that instead of simply focusing on economic or political issues, many populist movements frame their rhetoric around cultural and religious heritage. For example, leaders in India emphasize Hindu civilization to strengthen national unity, while Turkey's leadership often invokes Islamic identity to assert cultural authority. In Europe, populist parties lean on Christian values to draw sharp boundaries between "us" and "them." These narratives help leaders justify exclusionary policies and boost their own legitimacy by presenting themselves as defenders of a threatened civilization. The article offers a useful lens to understand how culture and identity are increasingly central to the politics of populism today.

(P&RR, 2024) In their article *The Surge of Civilizational Populism from Politics and Rights Review* dig deeper into how cultural and civilizational narratives have become central to populist politics across the globe. It contends that civilizational populism transgresses the old ideological divides, employing identity-based tactics to mobilize support and construct political agendas. By highlighting a common cultural history or religious heritage, politicians depict their societies as threatened by foreigners whether immigrants, minorities, or international institutions. This populism feeds on a nostalgic perception of a golden past and fosters a high level of in-group solidarity. Nonetheless, the piece also explains that this strategy tends to embroil people further in social divisions, cutting off those not adhering to the prevailing civilizational identity. This is complementary to previous literature since it showcases the extent to which civilizational populist discourse has expanded and stretched, influencing political discourse globally.

(Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023) In their book "*Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism*" provide a comprehensive exploration of how civilizational identity particularly through religion has become central to the rhetoric of contemporary populist movements. The authors contend that whereas classical populism tends to split society on economic or class lines, civilizational populism builds political discourses on long-standing religious and cultural identities. Under this system, "the people" are not only a moral majority but are the custodians of a higher civilization, frequently presented as opposed to both internal "others" and outside enemies. Based on a vast array of case studies ranging from India and Turkey to Hungary and the United States; the book thoroughly elucidates how populist politicians utilize civilizational rhetoric to legitimize exclusionary policies and establish their authority. Religion serves two purposes: it is both a symbolic marker of civilizational frontiers and an instrument of political mobilization. The authors also point to the international and, indeed, transnational character of this phenomenon, that religion enables civilizational populists to construct ideological bridges over state borders. This research is particularly useful in illustrating how civilizational populism challenges democratic values by exacerbating social cleavages and disempowering pluralist institutions.

(Yilmaz & Morieson, The Rise of Authoritarian Civilizational Populism in Turkey, India, Russia and China., 2024) In their article "The Rise of Authoritarian Civilizational Populism in Turkey, India, Russia, and China," offer a comparative analysis of how civilizational narratives are employed within authoritarian populist regimes across these four nations. It examines how leaders in these countries utilize historical and cultural identities to legitimize their authority and marginalize dissenting voices. Within the Turkish state, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan uses

both aspects of Ottoman and Islamic heritage strategically as a means of not only securing his grip on power but also of successfully silencing any possible sources of opposition that may arise. By contrast, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi actively espouses an agenda of Hindu nationalism, in which he places great stress on India's glorious and ancient civilization as a means of fostering a strong sense of national unity while, at the same time, excluding various minority groups in the country. In return, Russian President Vladimir Putin rightly appeals to the authority of Orthodox Christianity and Eurasianist ideology as a means of justifying his centralized grip over the nation as well as of pursuing his ambitious expansionist policies. In China, President Xi Jinping places tremendous stress on Confucian morals and on China's identity as a historical continuity with the past as a means of solidifying the grip of the Communist Party while, concurrently, seeking to contain Western powers' influence. The article puts forward an argument that such regimes posit a definite difference between a fantasy of a civilizational identity and outside dangers to the same, which they suppose, a method that is found to erode democratic institutions and civil liberties within their countries. By framing their leadership in this civilizational context, these leaders hope to instill a profound sense of unity and mission that transcends and prevails over political opposition and disagreement. This type of comparative study will be useful in bringing into view the ongoing world trend in which authoritarian rulers have been mobilizing the strength of civilizational stories in an effort to deepen and solidify their grip on office, hence engendering the urgent necessity to conduct further studies on the manner in which this strategy configures international politics along with local mechanisms of government.

(EuropeanCenterforPopulismStudies., 2024) In their report “*Civilizational Populism and Religious Authoritarianism in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives*” explore how religious identity is increasingly politicized to strengthen authoritarian rule in South Asia. In Bangladesh, despite the country's formal commitment to secularism, political leaders have increasingly used Islamic narratives to bolster their legitimacy, often sidelining minority groups and undermining democratic norms. A similar pattern is visible in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has been mobilized to promote a vision of civilizational superiority, justifying exclusionary policies against Tamils and Muslims and deepening ethnic divisions. In the Maldives, where Sunni Islam is constitutionally enshrined as the sole state religion, the fusion of religious identity with national citizenship has allowed ruling elites to suppress religious freedom and pluralistic expression. Across all three cases, civilizational populism and religious authoritarianism are shown to work hand in hand, enabling political elites to entrench their power by constructing narrow, religiously defined notions of national identity. This strategy not only marginalizes minority communities but also erodes the foundations of inclusive, democratic governance.

(Yilmaz & Saleem, Hindutva civilizational populist BJP's enforcement of digital authoritarianism in India, 2022) In their article present a compelling analysis of how the rise of Hindutva-driven civilizational populism under Narendra Modi's leadership has transformed India's digital and political landscape. The authors argue that India, once celebrated as the world's largest democracy, is increasingly adopting authoritarian practices, particularly through the digital domain. Drawing on a four-level framework: Full Network, Sub-Network, Proxies, and Network Nodes; they detail how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has systematically curtailed internet freedom, enhanced state surveillance, and weaponized social media to silence dissent and reinforce majoritarian narratives. The article accentuates how the Modi government's use of digital technology has shifted from promises of democratization to practices of control and exclusion. Internet shutdowns, the regulation of online content, manipulation of social media algorithms, and

surveillance of activists and journalists have become routine tools of governance. The BJP's digital strategy, closely intertwined with Hindutva ideology, creates a civilizational narrative that portrays Hindus as the "pure people" under threat from "outsiders," primarily Muslims and other minorities. This narrative justifies both online harassment and real-world violence against marginalized groups, normalizing intolerance within society. Furthermore, Yilmaz and Saleem highlight how regulatory frameworks like the Information Technology Rules, 2021, have tightened government control over digital platforms, compelling tech companies to comply with censorship demands. At the grassroots level, BJP-affiliated digital armies propagate misinformation and hate speech, intensifying polarization and undermining democratic dialogue. By linking the erosion of internet freedoms to the broader project of civilizational populism, the article offers a critical perspective on how digital spaces are being reshaped to serve authoritarian ends. Inclusively, the study paints a sobering picture of India's democratic backsliding, illustrating how religion, populism, and technology can converge to create a digitally enforced authoritarian regime.

(Falki, 2022) In her article "The Strands of Religious Populism and Otherization of Muslims in India," offers a sufficient exploration of how religious populism has reshaped the contours of Indian secularism and national identity. Falki traces the historical and political roots of Hindu nationalism, emphasizing how the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its persistent use of religious populist rhetoric have intensified the marginalization and "othering" of Muslims, India's largest minority group. The article situates this phenomenon within broader global trends of right-wing populism, but underscores the particular intensity and complexity of the Indian context, where longstanding socio-economic inequalities and fragmented identities create fertile ground for exclusionary narratives. Drawing on both historical analysis and contemporary developments, Falki argues that the deliberate construction of Muslims as "internal outsiders" not only erodes the pluralistic fabric of Indian society but also threatens the foundational principles of Indian democracy and secularism. Through a careful synthesis of political theory and empirical observation, the article humanizes the lived realities of Indian Muslims while critically interrogating the forces that enable their systematic otherization, making a compelling case for the urgent need to reclaim inclusive national narratives.

(Yilmaz & Saleem, A Quest for Identity: The Case of Religious Populism in Pakistan, 2021) In their article present a compelling analysis of how religious populism has been deeply woven into Pakistan's national identity and political landscape since its inception. The authors trace the evolution of religious populism from the early days of independence, highlighting how both civil and military governments have strategically invoked religious narratives to legitimize their authority and consolidate public support. They argue that this instrumentalization of religion has had a profound impact on the collective imagination of society, as is easily observable in the way in which schoolchildren in Pakistan identify the very name of their country with religious slogans that dominate. Furthermore, this phenomenon has helped to create a permanent mentality marked by an "us versus them" mentality, which acts to mark off who is regarded as a member of the nation and who is necessarily marginalized or excluded. The article offers a sophisticated historical analysis, alluding to the original pluralistic and secular hopes of the founding fathers of Pakistan, hopes which, over time, increasingly lost ground and gave rise to a burgeoning trend of Islamization, as much as political instability and governance challenges became increasingly frequent and intense. Through the use of elaborate case studies based on influential populist leaders, such as A.K. Fazlul Haq, Moulana Bhashani, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the authors are able to

successfully demonstrate how populism within Pakistan has oscillated between forms associated with both left-wing and right-wing political ideologies, yet has consistently relied upon the use of religious symbolism as a tool of mobilizing and rallying the masses. Ultimately, the work of Yilmaz and Saleem acts to humanize the rich and complex relationship that exists between religion, populism, and national identity within Pakistan, offering valuable and critical insights into the lasting impact of religious populism in shaping not only the political sphere but also the everyday lives of the population.

(Batool, Yilmaz, & Shakil, 2023) In their article "Contest between leaders of the Ummah: Comparing civilizational populisms of PTI and TLP in Pakistan" present a timely and comprehensive comparative analysis of two major strands of populism in contemporary Pakistani politics. The authors address a notable gap in the literature by moving beyond the well-studied case of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) to include the far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), offering a meticulous exploration of how both parties employ civilizational populism to define "the people," "the elite," and "the others." Drawing on Brubaker's three-dimensional framework of populist antagonism, the article demonstrates how both PTI and TLP construct antagonistic narratives not only along vertical (elite vs. people) and horizontal (cultural identity) lines, but also through a civilizational lens that pits a homogenous Muslim "Ummah" against perceived external and internal threats. The analysis reveals that while PTI's populism has evolved to incorporate religious civilizationalism especially in response to Western influence and the war on terror-TLP's rhetoric is rooted in the defense of Islamic sanctities and Barelvi identity, often mobilizing street power around sensitive religious issues. By placing these developments in the larger context of Pakistan's political instability and growing religious militancy, the article humanizes the lived experiences of political mobilization and cautions against the dangers of the growing deployment of exclusionary religious narratives in electoral politics. This book is unique in its critical examination of both the historical paths and current strategies of PTI and TLP, providing insightful analysis into the changing landscape of civilizational populism in Pakistan.

(Yilmaz, Batool, & Shakil, Pakistan: Islamist Civilizational Populism, 2023) In their book chapter explain how civilizational populism has taken root and flourished in the country's unique socio-political landscape. The authors start by carefully examining the historical and structural circumstances that have rendered religion an integral part of political identity, providing fertile soil for populist leaders to arise and become overwhelmingly popular. By tracing the populist movements of the 1970s and 1960s, with specific focus on Zulfikar A. Bhutto's charisma of leadership and his Islamic civilizationist approach, the chapter provides a rich historical background that allows readers to understand the deeply entrenched roots of religious populism in Pakistan. Carrying over into the present day, the authors provide a solid comparative examination of two dominant contemporary populist players: Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Islamist far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). This comparison, throughout the chapter, exposes how each party uses civilizational narratives in order to identify the nation and its "real" people and, in so doing, presents itself as the only defender of Muslim identity and Pakistan's destiny. What emerges is a poignant critique of the state's role in nurturing a patronizing vision of Muslim nationhood, which inadvertently empowers populist narratives that divide society along civilizational lines. The chapter civilizes these political dynamics by highlighting how ordinary citizens, caught in the crossfire of competing populisms, are drawn to promises of salvation and belonging amid uncertainty and fragmentation.

(MAÇÃES, 2020) Provides that civilization states are organized around culture rather than politics. In the backdrop of keeping and stimulating respective civilization as a distinct identity of state, the protection, preserving and assertion of a specific cultural and religious tradition becomes paramount task of the state. Many scholars elucidate civilization in the context of religious and cultural tradition and identities. In the Indian case, it has been observed that significance of cultural and religious ties are more significant than legal status as 'Citizenship Amendment Act'¹ typifies that culture may even determine who can secure Indian citizenship. The advocates of India as civilization view nation state as a western and imported idea whereas India as a civilization marketed as an alternate to the Western influences. This helps us to understand that how these civilization states start to act like populists. He explicates that how state is built and how do they expand depend upon the way they devise the efficacious strategy of social relations and cultivation of collective power.

Discussion

In recent years, the political landscapes of India and Pakistan have been strongly shaped by a phenomenon known as civilizational populism; a form of populist politics that frames national identity through the lens of ancient civilizations and religious heritage. This approach does more than just pit "the people" against "the elite"; it draws sharp boundaries between the majority and religious minorities, often casting the latter as existential threats to the nation's core values and way of life. Both nations have used this specific rhetoric to fuel a process of religious othering, in which entire communities are not only seen as different from the majority, but are defined as outsiders who threaten or challenge the very civilizational heartbeat of the nation itself. Civilizational populism must not be misconstrued as a monolithic, one-size-fits-all ideology; rather, it is a "thin-centered" idea that attaches itself to deeper and more nuanced narratives, be it Hindutva in India or Islamic nationalism in Pakistan, in order to lend political heft and emotional texture to the polarizing idea of "us" versus "them" (EuropeanCenterforPopulismStudies, 2023). In India, the deeply Hindu nationalist movements have increasingly built the nation as an eternal and ancient Hindu civilization threatened by sundry forces, positioning religious minorities, and particularly Muslims, as the final "other" of such a narrative. In Pakistan, Islamic populism has similarly built the nation as a bulwark or fortress of Islam, where non-Muslim minorities, as well as dissident Muslim sects, are built as dangers to religious purity as well as national purity.

Indian and Pakistani civilizational populism employs religious and historical narratives to form exclusionary national identities, but the nature of the narratives, targets, and political strategies vary widely owing to each state's particular historical and institutional conditions. Indian populism of civilizational form is deeply rooted in Hindutva ideology, imagining the country as an eternal Hindu civilization under attack from "alien" forces, namely Islam and Christianity. Political organizations like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) promote the idea of Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state) reminding one of a nostalgic memory of a golden Vedic past. Within such a paradigm, religious minorities like Muslims are viewed as outsiders with their loyalty towards India in question, even though they have a long history stretching back centuries (Falki, 2022).

¹ This Act fast-tracks Indian citizenship for immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh & Afghanistan however not applied to if immigrants are Muslim.

Pakistan, on the other hand, is a civilizational populist state but in symbolic terms based on Islamic nationalism, which constitutes the nation state as a bulwark of Sunni Islam. Political forces like PTI accentuate a Pan-Islamic Muslim identity consonant with the original purpose of Pakistan as a homeland for South Asian Muslims. Other more hardline parties such as the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) use sectarian language that victimizes Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, and non-Muslims and presents them as threats to national integrity and religious purity (ICC, 2025). The sectarian aspect makes Pakistan's populism different from that of India's mainly majority-minority religious divide. Both the targets of religious othering also vary across the two countries. In India, religious minorities particularly Muslims are portrayed as leftovers of colonial or Mughal conquests eroding Hindu culture. This has been given institutional expression by laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act and cow-protection legislation that tend to push these groups to the margins. Pakistan's civilizational populism, on the other hand, focuses on sectarian fault lines within Islam and aims at non-Muslim minorities like Hindus and Ahmadis, as well as Shia Muslims. This sectarian othering tends to manifest itself through violent confrontations and discriminatory tactics like the Srilankan factory manager Priyantha Diyawadana's mob lynching in Sialkot in 2021 (AlJazeera, 2022).

Politically, Indian civilizational populism has been highly institutionalized. The BJP uses legislative control to adopt majoritarian policies, for example, the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, while local networks such as the RSS organize cultural activism and vigilante mobs to mobilize Hindu nationalist agendas. In Pakistan, populism exists in a hybrid democratic regime in which the military and religious institutions exercise strong influence. Whereas PTI mixed anti-corruption discourse with Islamic identity politics like the slogan of former Prime Minister Imran Khan "Riyasat-e-Madina", parties like TLP depend greatly on street agitation and blasphemy charges to put pressure on the government. In contrast to India's institutionalized and cohesive Hindutva movement, Pakistan's civilizational populism is symbolized and more fragmented, with different Sunni groups vying for hegemony. The impact of civilizational populism on both nations is deep but different. India has witnessed an escalation of electoral authoritarianism, where democratic freedoms are progressively curtailed through legislation that limits dissent and minority rights. Attacks on Muslims and Christians have become increasingly prevalent and de facto tolerated by state actors. Pakistan, conversely, suffers from sectarian violence and politicized blasphemy cases that fuel intercommunal tensions. Yet, in Pakistan, populist forces are still less institutionally dominant and are limited by the military's role as a powerful broker.

Conclusion

The comparison of India and Pakistan shows that civilizational populism is a potent ideological framework that actively creates and justifies religious "others," rather than just a political tactic. Populist leaders in both states use civilizational narratives to determine who really belongs in the country, establish cultural superiority, and claim moral authority. Both Pakistan's Islamic populism and India's majoritarian Hindu nationalism have different historical roots, but they both rely on discriminatory language that presents minority groups as internal dangers to the state's moral and cultural foundation. Conclusively, civilizational populism works in two ways: it delegitimizes minorities by linking them to foreignness, disloyalty, or cultural pollution, while simultaneously elevating the majority population as the true guardian of the country. In Pakistan, non-Muslim minorities including dissident Muslim sects are marginalized in the interest of preserving a perceived Islamic civilizational purity, whereas in India, discourses portraying Muslims as relics of an invading civilization strengthen the Hindu-Muslim split. Both situations highlight how populist governments use civilizational identity to consolidate power, stifle

pluralism, and redefine the parameters of citizenship, notwithstanding their distinctions. In the end, this research emphasizes that civilizational populism is a vicious cycle that weakens democratic institutions, normalizes exclusionary policies, and encourages street-level bigotry once religious othering is ingrained in political discourse. Understanding this process is essential to understanding why, in spite of constitutional pledges of equality, majoritarianism in South Asia is growing. A comparative perspective reveals how comparable structural logics underlie religious othering as well as how it emerges differently in the two states. Reimagining national identity beyond civilizational dichotomies and reiterating pluralism as the cornerstone of political community are necessary to break this cycle and ensure democratic resilience in both India and Pakistan.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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