Religion in Pakistani Politics: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Speeches of Imran Khan

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Abstract: This dissertation examines the complex nexus of religion and politics in the country of Pakistan by looking at the religious appeal in Imran Khan's political speeches after his removal from power on April 10, 2022. The research investigates ten selected speeches using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Teun A. Van Dijk's Ideological Square Model (ISM) with the aim to understand the way Khan constructs Islamic political identities in order to gain support and influence public opinion. The methodology involves qualitative content analysis, where speeches were transcribed from video recordings and analyzed for explicit and implicit religious themes. The results suggest that Khan uses religion to polarize the 'us' versus 'them' narrative, creating a self-reinforcing identity based on national pride and religion that distinguishes his supporters from his political opponents. His rhetoric not only seeks to rationalize his political objectives but attempts to appeal to his audience's emotions which subsequently increases his control as a leader. The highlights of this research show the leveraging of religion as a discourse in influence the support base of political leaders in Pakistan. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of how religious rhetoric can influence public opinion and political identity, emphasizing the need for further exploration into the intersection of religion and politics in contemporary societies. The research underscores the potential for religious language to both unite and polarize, calling for careful consideration of its use in political communication to foster social harmony rather than division.

Keywords — Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Ideological Square Model, Political Communication, Religion, Imran Khan, Religious Rhetoric, Speeches.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the role of religious references in political speeches by analyzing Imran Khan's addresses delivered after his ouster from power on April 10, 2022. Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodological tool and Teun A. van Dijk's Ideological Square model as the theoretical framework, this study explores how religious rhetoric is employed to construct political narratives, influence public perception, and legitimize leadership in the contemporary Pakistani political landscape. Through a close analysis of ten post-ouster speeches, the research identifies how Imran Khan uses Islamic themes to portray himself positively and his opponents negatively. The findings indicate that religious symbolism and discourse play a strategic role in polarizing the nation, mobilizing support, and reinforcing ideological divisions.

BACKGROUND

Political discourse is inherently persuasive. According to Janoschka (2010), the fundamental objective of political leaders is to shape public opinion and persuade the masses to align with their political objectives. Politicians frequently face the challenge of justifying past decisions, particularly those that may lack substantial outcomes. Benoit et al. (2003) argue that the rhetoric used in political campaigns is primarily aimed at securing electoral success, making persuasion a critical element. Within this context, religion emerges as a powerful tool to influence voter preferences and justify political actions.

Religion, rooted in belief systems and shared identities, is a fundamental component of collective and individual life. Levine and Mainwaring (1986) suggest that religious actors play a significant role in shaping democratic processes. In countries like Pakistan, where religion and politics are deeply intertwined, religion is not merely a personal or spiritual matter—it serves as a national ideological foundation.

Historically, Pakistan's political framework has relied on religious narratives. During the British colonial era, the "Divide and Rule" policy exploited religious divisions, a strategy that echoed in the politics of post-independence Pakistan. Religious symbolism and references have since become regular features of political discourse. The self-other binary, as identified by Ahmed and Zahoor (2020), illustrates how political figures construct both external enemies (e.g., the West) and internal "others" (e.g., minorities) to rally public support and create a sense of unity among followers.

Zafar and Javaid (2020) further explore the historical Islamization of Pakistani politics, emphasizing how political and religious elites have used Islam to further their interests—often at the expense of democratic development. Chilton and Schäffner (2002) note that successful politicians are adept at using persuasive language, and in Pakistan, this often includes invoking religious sentiments.

This research focuses on Imran Khan's speeches after April 2022, analyzing how religious elements are used to mobilize the public and delegitimize opposition. Through CDA and Van Dijk's Ideological Square, this study examines both micro- and macro-level discursive strategies.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Religion remains a potent force in shaping political discourse, particularly in societies where it holds deep cultural significance. Political leaders often invoke religious rhetoric to legitimize their actions, secure loyalty, and build collective identity. This tactic, however, tends to polarize society by framing political narratives in terms of "us" versus "them" (Khan, 2019; Potz, 2019). Such polarization impacts national identity formation and public opinion. In Pakistan, this phenomenon has intensified in recent years, yet there is a lack of focused analysis on how specific political figures, especially Imran Khan, strategically use religious references in times of political crisis. This research addresses that gap by critically analyzing his post-ouster discourse.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is crucial for understanding the complex intersection between politics and religion in Pakistan. Religion in Pakistan holds both spiritual and national significance, making it a strategic resource in political communication. This research illustrates how religious sentiments are constructed and manipulated to justify political actions, win public support, and create political identities. By focusing on Imran Khan's post-ouster rhetoric, the study contributes to broader debates on political discourse, identity politics, and governance. It also offers insights for future political communication strategies that seek to foster unity rather than deepen societal divisions.

This chapter introduced the research problem, contextualized within Pakistan's religious-political landscape, and highlighted the need for a focused analysis of Imran Khan's speeches post-April 2022. Religion remains a powerful rhetorical device, and this study examines how it is strategically employed in political discourse. Using CDA and the Ideological Square model, the research investigates the formation of self and other narratives, the construction of identity, and the influence of religious references on public perception. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the academic discourse on religion and politics, while offering practical implications for policy-makers, scholars, and political communicators in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research highlights the powerful interplay between language, religion, and politics [8]. Scholars such as Fairclough and Chilton explore how political language constructs ideologies, reinforces power structures, and influences public perception [8]. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), political speech is understood not as neutral, but as embedded in ideological and cultural frameworks that serve specific interests.

In the Pakistani context, the intersection of religion and politics has long been explored. Scholars have shown how religious narratives are strategically used by political actors to justify their decisions, legitimize authority, and mobilize the masses [9], [10]. For instance, Zafar and Javaid (2020) demonstrate how religion was historically exploited by political and religious elites to advance specific political objectives, while Ahmed and Zahoor (2020) discuss the internal and external construction of the "Other" in religious-political discourse, particularly in Pakistan [10]. These analyses help establish how religion is instrumentalized in national politics to frame identity, divide groups, and reinforce ideological goals.

This study builds upon this existing literature by applying CDA to a specific case: Imran Khan's speeches after his ouster from office on April 10, 2022. While previous research offers broader examinations of religion and politics, this study provides focused insights into how one political figure uses religious language and symbolism to shape political narratives and influence public opinion. By analyzing ten speeches, this research uncovers rhetorical strategies that reveal how Khan portrays himself positively while demonizing his opponents using Islamic references. These discursive choices help construct a binary between "us" and "them," aligning his political struggle with religious legitimacy.

Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on political discourse in Pakistan by offering a contemporary, context-specific analysis of how religious rhetoric operates as a strategic tool in political communication.

This chapter examines the interplay of language and religion in shaping Pakistani politics and public discourse. It explores

how language facilitates political manipulation and the construction of nationalistic sentiments, focusing on the intersection of language, religion, and the political ideology of Imran Khan. This analysis utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate religious narratives in Khan's speeches, filling a gap in existing research on the influence of religion on political identity in Pakistan.

LANGUAGE IN POLITICS

Political discourse is a powerful tool for shaping public perception and achieving political objectives [1, 2, 3]. Politicians utilize linguistic strategies to disseminate ideologies, influence public opinion, and gain consent [1, 2]. The control of language sustains power structures and facilitates the acceptance of specific policies [3]. In contemporary society, mass media amplifies this influence through carefully crafted messages, slogans, and imagery, further impacting political decision-making [4].

RELIGION IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Religion plays a significant role in shaping political identities and influencing political phenomena [5, 6, 7]. Religious language is used to consolidate values and beliefs, fostering a sense of common identity and purpose [5]. The underrepresentation of religious factors in political science research has been noted, highlighting the need for greater inclusion of religious perspectives in political analysis [7, 8, 9]. Religion's influence extends to international relations and policy-making in a post-Westphalian world [10]. The interplay between religion and politics can manifest in both positive (e.g., fostering democracy) and negative (e.g., fueling violence) ways [6].

RELIGION IN PAKISTAN'S POLITICS

Pakistan's history reveals a complex and evolving relationship between religion and politics. From Jinnah's vision to the policies of subsequent leaders (Ayub Khan, Bhutto, Zia-ul-Haq, and Musharraf), the role of Islam in governance has been a central theme [11, 12, 13]. These leaders employed varying approaches to Islamization, impacting the country's legal and social fabric. The Islamization of education has been a key instrument in shaping national and religious sentiments [14, 15, 16]. Religious narratives and cultural norms deeply influence political discourse and public perception, as exemplified by Imran Khan's strategic use of religious lexicon to connect with his audience [17].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between language, ideology, and power is central to political communication, shaping public opinion and reinforcing social structures. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps uncover how leaders use language to maintain authority and influence society. In Pakistan, political speeches often use religious and nationalistic language to strengthen cultural identity and mobilize support. The Ideological Square Model explains how politicians highlight positive traits of their group while emphasizing negative traits of opponents to create an "us versus them" narrative. Through macro and micro strategies like positive self-presentation, polarization, and rhetorical devices, political leaders craft persuasive narratives that legitimize their position and delegitimize others. This study uses CDA to explore how language in political discourse shapes identities, ideologies, and power relations.

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine Imran Khan's public addresses following his removal as Prime Minister on April 10, 2022. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Van Dijk's Ideological Square Model (ISM), the research investigates how Khan's rhetoric influenced public perception, particularly through religious references. Ten speeches rich in religious discourse were purposively sampled from YouTube news channels. Specific segments from each speech were selected based on the frequency and depth of religious references. Data collection involved transcribing the relevant portions of Khan's speeches in Urdu, translating them into English while preserving meaning, and coding them using NVivo software. NVivo facilitated the organization of data, helping identify patterns and rhetorical strategies efficiently.

The analysis was conducted on two levels: at the macro level, the study explored themes of positive self-representation and negative portrayal of opponents using ISM's four strategies; at the micro level, it examined rhetorical tools such as metaphor, hyperbole, counterfactuals, and polarization to understand Khan's use of religious rhetoric. Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including objectivity in analysis, respect for confidentiality, and attention to the impact of interpretation. This methodological framework, combining CDA, ISM, and NVivo, allows for a systematic exploration of how Khan's language contributes to the construction of political identity and public sentiment in Pakistan.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of Imran Khan's speeches using Van Dijk's Ideological Square Model and NVivo software. The analysis integrates original Urdu references with English translations to ensure a nuanced understanding of the religious rhetoric employed.

Using NVivo 14, a computer-assisted analysis of Imran Khan's speeches revealed a strategic fusion of religious and political themes. Word frequency tools showed repeated use of terms like "Allah," "Prophet," and "Pakistan," indicating a deliberate religious framing. Positive words such as "justice" and "youth" reflected efforts to inspire confidence and moral authority. Sentiment analysis highlighted a dominance of moderately positive references in Khan's self-representation,

while negative sentiments targeted opponents, reinforcing an "us vs. them" narrative. Word trees further illustrated associations between religion and values like justice, leadership, and resistance. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Muslims were invoked to legitimize political positions through historical and moral parallels. Overall, Khan's discourse constructs a faith-centered political identity rooted in national and moral values.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS USING VAN DIJK'S IDEOLOGICAL SQUARE MODEL

A critical discourse analysis of selected speeches (Speeches 1-10) using Van Dijk's model revealed consistent patterns:

Speech	Macro-Level Strategies (Us vs. Them)	Micro-Level Strategies (Examples)
1 (Peshawar, April 13, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (national pride, spiritual identity); negative emphasis on "them" (religious exploitation, disrespect of Islam).	National self-glorification, actor description, norm expression, consensus, hyperbole, euphemism, polarization, comparison, illustration/example.
2 (Karachi, April 16, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (moral responsibility); negative emphasis on "them" (corruption, injustice).	Actor description, norm expression, national self-glorification, hyperbole, authority, polarization.
3 (Lahore, April 21, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (national potential, freedom); negative emphasis on "them" (corruption, foreign influence).	Authority, national self-glorification, presupposition, implication, norm expression, metaphor, euphemism, illustration/example, polarization, consensus, lexicalization.
4 (Mianwali, May 6, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (spiritual awakening, national pride); negative emphasis on "them" (oppressive forces).	Authority, actor description, national self-glorification, norm expression, metaphor, consensus, polarization.
5 (Abbottabad, May 8, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (spiritual identity, national pride); negative emphasis on "them" (corrupt systems, injustice).	National self-glorification, polarization, authority, norm expression, actor description, illustration/example, counterfactual.
6 (Faisalabad, May 15, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (spiritual identity, national pride); negative emphasis on "them" (insults to Islam, injustice).	National self-glorification, authority, norm expression, illustration/example, evidentiality, polarization, norm expression.
7 (Rawalpindi, Nov 26, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (spiritual strength, national unity); negative emphasis on "them" (corruption, oppression).	Burden, authority, categorization, norm expression, implication, evidentiality, illustration/example, norm expression, hyperbole, lexicalization, victimization, comparison, norm expression, counterfactual, victimization, implication, hyperbole, authority, metaphor, authority, national self-glorification, irony, evidentiality, vagueness, victimization, implication, hyperbole, polarization.
8 (Faisalabad, Sept 4, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (national pride, spiritual unity); negative emphasis on	Illustration/example, authority, authority, national self-glorification.

Speech	Macro-Level Strategies (Us vs. Them)	Micro-Level Strategies (Examples)
	"them" (injustice, moral failure).	52
9 (Peshawar, Sept 6, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (spiritual empowerment, national potential); negative emphasis on "them" (societal and spiritual chains).	Counterfactuals, illustration, norm expressions, national self-glorification, illustration/example, national self-glorification, evidentiality.
10 (Multan, Sept 8, 2022)	Positive emphasis on "us" (national potential, spiritual strength); negative emphasis on "them" (injustice, moral failure).	Norm expression, national self-glorification, categorization, lexicalization, illustration/example, metaphor, norm expression, national self-glorification, illustration/example, norm expression, metaphor, national self-glorification, authority, illustration/example, norm expression, comparison.

The consistent use of religious language to construct an "us vs. them" dichotomy, coupled with predominantly positive self-representation and negative portrayals of opponents, effectively mobilizes support and reinforces a collective identity rooted in religious and national pride. This approach transcends purely logical argumentation, engaging with the audience on an emotional and spiritual level, aligning with Hall's (1983) critique of linear Western thinking.
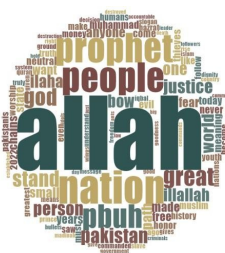
This analysis demonstrates how Imran Khan strategically employs religious rhetoric to shape political identity, create ideological divides, and mobilize support. His speeches are not simply political statements but deeply embedded religious narratives designed to resonate with his audience's values and beliefs. Further research could explore the long-term impact of this rhetoric on Pakistani society and politics. Remember to cite Hall (1983) appropriately in your final submission.

DISCUSSION

This research examines the interplay of religious rhetoric and political identity in Imran Khan's speeches, focusing on how religious undertones shape his political messaging and resonate with Pakistani society. The study analyzes the strategic manipulation of religious themes to construct political identity and garner support, broadening our understanding of religio-political discourse in Pakistan. This study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) informed by Teun A. van Dijk's Ideological Square Model (ISM) to analyze ten selected speeches delivered by Imran Khan after April 10, 2022. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) using NVivo 14 facilitated the identification of key themes, sentiment analysis, and word frequency analysis. The analysis integrated original Urdu references with English translations to ensure accuracy and nuance.This research draws upon CDA's focus on the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1989, 2013). Van Dijk's ISM (1998, 2004, 2006) provides a framework for analyzing the construction of "us vs. them" dichotomies in political discourse, focusing on positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Hall's (1976, 1989) work on representation and cultural identity informs the analysis of how Khan constructs a collective identity through religious and national appeals.

COMPUTER-ASSISTED ANALYSIS USING NVIVO
NVivo 14 facilitated the analysis of a database of Imran Khan's speeches. Key findings are summarized below:

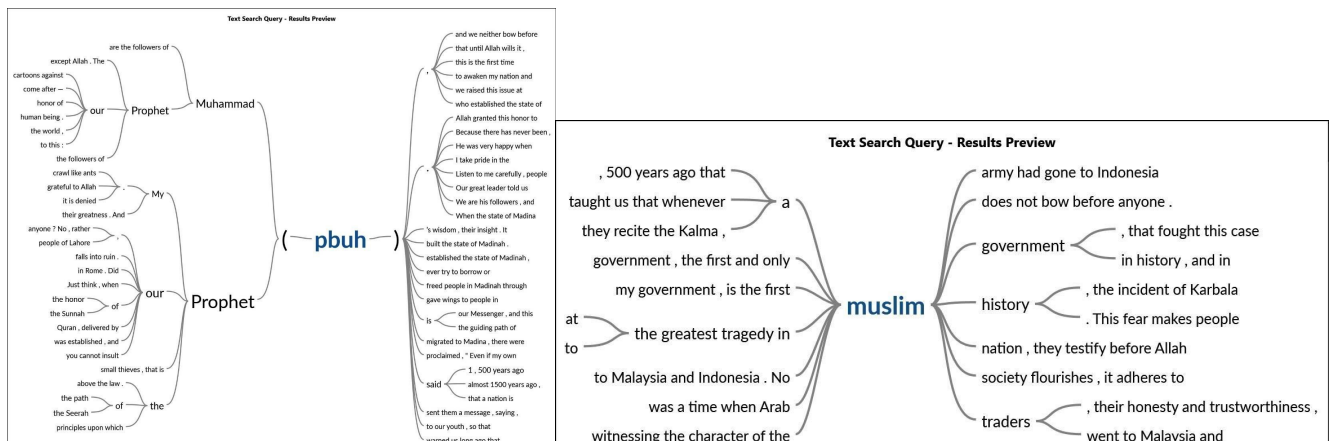*WORD FREQUENCY ANALYSIS (FIGURES 1 & 2)*
Word clouds and tree maps (Figures 1 & 2) revealed high-frequency terms such as "Allah," "nation," "Prophet," "Pakistan," and "PBUH." These findings indicate a deliberate linking of religious and political themes in Khan's discourse.

Positive terms ("justice," "youth," "great") were also prevalent, suggesting an attempt to cultivate public confidence and support. Terms associated with moral values ("honor," "free," "worship") further reinforced this positive self-representation.
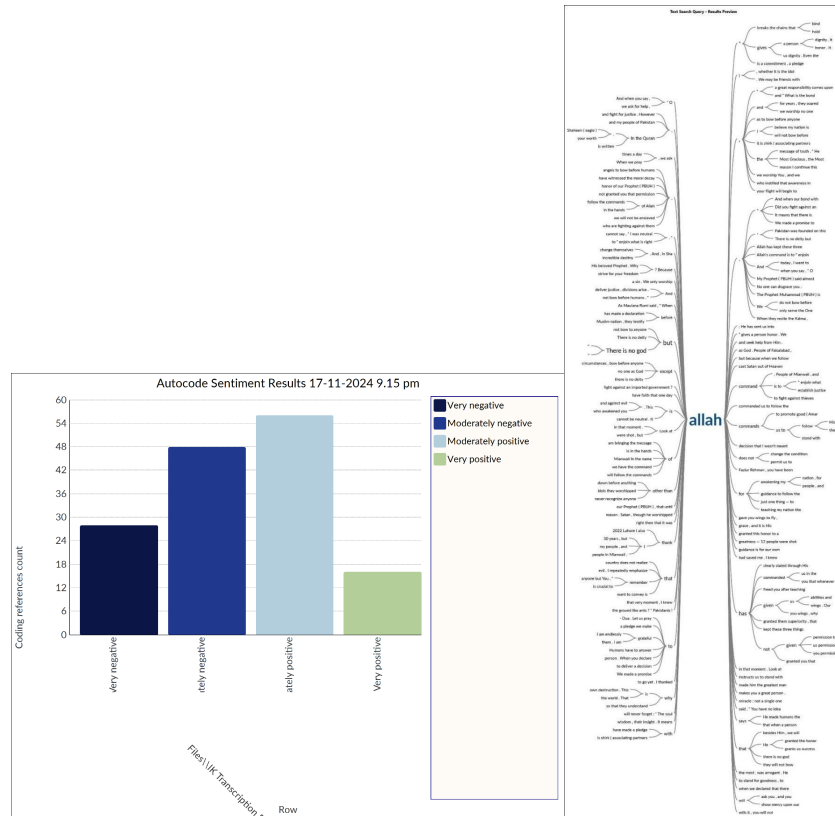
SENTIMENT ANALYSIS (FIGURE 3)

NVivo's sentiment analysis tool (Figure 3) revealed a predominance of moderately positive sentiments (55 references) in Khan's self-representation. Moderately negative (49 references) and very negative sentiments (25 references) were primarily directed at opposing groups, reinforcing the "us vs. them" dichotomy.

WORD TREE ANALYSIS (FIGURES 4-6)

Word tree analyses (Figures 4-6) illustrated the interconnectedness of key terms. "Allah" was frequently associated with justice and moral responsibility. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was linked to themes of leadership, justice, and resistance. Finally, references to Muslims were connected to historical contributions, integrity, and leadership. These connections strategically intertwine religious principles with political narratives.

Analysis revealed consistent patterns in Khan's speeches:
- **Religious and National Identity:** Frequent use of terms like "Allah," "Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)," and "Pakistan" strategically linked religious and national identities, fostering a sense of collective belonging and shared purpose. The slogan "There is no god but Allah" served as a powerful unifying symbol.
- **"Us vs. Them" Dichotomy:** Khan consistently constructed a binary opposition between a virtuous "us"

(supporters, embodying national pride and Islamic values) and a corrupt "them" (opponents, often associated with Western influence or moral failings). This strategy served to mobilize support and delegitimize adversaries.

- **Moral Authority:** Khan positioned himself as a moral leader guided by divine principles, emphasizing justice, accountability, and the preservation of Islamic values. This self-representation enhanced his credibility and legitimacy.
- **Emotional Appeals:** The use of emotionally charged language ("justice," "honor," "grace") alongside religious references created a powerful emotional resonance, transcending purely logical argumentation. NVivo's sentiment analysis confirmed the predominantly positive sentiment associated with Khan's self-representation and the negative sentiment directed towards opponents.
- **Historical Narratives:** References to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the early Islamic state of Medina provided historical legitimacy to Khan's political agenda and inspired action.

Khan's strategic use of religious rhetoric aligns with existing literature on the interplay of religion and politics in Pakistan (Waseem, 2014; Khan, 2022; Almeida, 2013; Anwar et al., 2025). His approach echoes the religio-political strategies employed by previous Pakistani leaders (Saigol, 2007; Talbani, 1996), demonstrating the enduring influence of religious appeals in Pakistani politics. The findings support Grzymala-Busse's (2012) argument regarding religion's significant impact on political processes in Muslim-majority countries. Khan's rhetoric effectively mobilizes support by appealing to both religious and national sentiments, creating a powerful sense of collective identity and purpose. However, this strategy also risks exacerbating existing societal divisions and fostering polarization. This study demonstrates how Imran Khan strategically employs religious rhetoric to shape political identity, create ideological divides, and mobilize support. His speeches are not merely political statements but deeply embedded religious narratives designed to resonate with his audience's values and beliefs. Further research should explore the long-term consequences of this rhetoric on Pakistani society and politics, considering both its unifying and divisive potential. The findings highlight the need for critical analysis of religious discourse in political communication, particularly in diverse and potentially volatile contexts.

LIMITATIONS

This study's scope is limited by its focus on a specific set of speeches and its reliance on qualitative methodology. The analysis, while insightful, may not fully capture the breadth and depth of Khan's political rhetoric or the broader political context of Pakistan. A larger sample size and the incorporation of quantitative methods would strengthen future research.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should address these limitations by employing quantitative analysis alongside qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding. A broader scope encompassing a wider range of speeches, political actors, and time periods is crucial. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of Khan's rhetoric and its impact over time are needed. Comparative studies examining similar phenomena in other cultural contexts would offer valuable insights into the universality and specificity of this religio-political strategy. Such research would contribute significantly to our understanding of the complex dynamics between religion, identity, and political communication, particularly in diverse and potentially volatile societies. The findings underscore the need for critical analysis of religious discourse in political communication, emphasizing the potential for both unity and division. Further research should explore the long-term consequences of this rhetoric on Pakistani society and politics, carefully considering both its unifying and divisive potential.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how Imran Khan strategically employs religious rhetoric to shape political identity, create ideological divides, and mobilize support. His speeches are not merely political statements but deeply embedded religious narratives designed to resonate with his audience's values and beliefs. Further research should explore the long-term consequences of this rhetoric on Pakistani society and politics, considering both its unifying and divisive potential. The findings highlight the need for critical analysis of religious discourse in political communication, particularly in diverse and potentially volatile contexts.

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