



**Electoral Mobilization and Religious Populism:
An Analysis of the Rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in Punjab During
General Elections 2018 and 2024**

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Abstract:

This study examines the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections, focusing on the intersection of religious populism and electoral mobilization. The study focused on these questions: How did Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) transform from a religious movement to a political party while maintaining its movement-based identity? What role did the politics of blasphemy and sectarian identity play in shaping the electoral rise of TLP in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections? Drawing on Religious Populism Theory, the research explores how Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan leveraged sectarian identity, blasphemy politics and street activism to expand its political influence. The study highlights the party's hybrid nature, functioning simultaneously as a protest movement and a formal political actor. Electoral data, qualitative analysis of party strategies and case studies of major protests—including the Faizabad sit-in and responses to Asia Bibi's acquittal—demonstrate how Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan mobilized constituencies, particularly among lower-middle-class youth. The findings underscore the implications of religious populism for Pakistan's democratic processes and the evolving nature of electoral competition in Punjab.

Keywords: Pakistan, Punjab, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, electoral mobilization, politics, religious populism

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's Barelvi movement, an offshoot of India's nineteenth-century Sufi heritage, has gained political and religious momentum in recent years (*"The Potential for a New Strand"*, 2018). Parts of the Barelvi movement in Pakistan have become radicalized over the contentious issue of blasphemy, particularly following the 2011 assassination of ex-governor Punjab Salman Taseer and the 2016 hanging of his executioner, Mumtaz Qadri (Epping, 2013). Barelvis are often viewed as a

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counter to religious intolerance and as representing a gentle face of Islam in Pakistan, known for their inclusivity and tolerance (White, 2012). In light of this, it is pertinent to investigate the several elements contributing to the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which has gained the backing of certain sections of the Barelvi population, especially younger members of the lower middle class (Gallup Pakistan, 2024).

This article employs Religious Populism Theory and Political Opportunity Theory to examine TLP's rise, tracing its evolution from a movement to a political party while retaining its character as a movement and its impact on Barelvi politics in Pakistan. By positioning TLP within Pakistan's religio-political landscape, the article demonstrates that while TLP's ideological narratives and political activism are sectarian and exclusive, its overall development follows a trajectory similar to that of other Pakistani religious groups.

The article further examines the TLP's political activities and participation in the 2018 and 2024 Punjab general elections, using its electoral manifesto, published literature and YouTube videos. Furthermore, relevant journal articles and book chapters provide the historical context for TLP's rise in Punjab, especially about the elections in 2018 and 2024.

This study holds significance as it investigates the transformation of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) from a religious protest movement into a political party with electoral relevance in Punjab. By analyzing the impact of blasphemy politics, sectarian identity and populist rhetoric on its rise, the research provides insights into the evolving dynamics of religious populism in Pakistan. The findings contribute to broader scholarly debates on the relationship between religion and democracy in developing contexts, highlighting how movement parties mobilize marginalized communities while simultaneously deepening sectarian divides. In doing so, the study identifies both the opportunities and threats posed by the electoral integration of religious populist actors for Pakistan's democratic stability and inclusiveness.

This study aims to examine how Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has transformed from a religious movement into a political party while maintaining its movement-based identity. To analyze the influence of blasphemy politics and religious identity on the electoral rise of TLP in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections. To explore the populist rhetoric and mobilization strategies used by the TLP to consolidate its support base in Punjab and compete with mainstream political parties

The study focuses on the following research questions: How did Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) transform from a religious movement to a political party while maintaining its movement-based identity? What role did the politics of blasphemy and sectarian identity play in shaping the electoral rise of TLP in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections? How has TLP used populist rhetoric and mobilization strategies to build a support base in Punjab and challenge mainstream political parties?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections represents a pivotal intersection of religious populism and electoral mobilization. Historically, religious parties in Pakistan have combined ideological outreach with philanthropic

activities to consolidate support, as seen with Jamaat-e-Islami (Bano, 2012), the TLP has taken a distinctive path. Rooted in Barelvi activism and focused on blasphemy politics, the party has emerged as a popular, street-based force with a distinct identity, challenging both mainstream political actors and other religious groups.

The politics of blasphemy has become a key element of religious contestation in Pakistan, providing parties like the TLP a highly emotional platform to legitimize their political claims (Haq, 2019). This capacity for mobilization grew under the leadership of Khadim Hussain Rizvi, whose fiery rhetoric and expert use of social media expanded the party's reach to millions of followers (Malik, 2018; Ali, 2017). As the self-styled defender of the sanctity of Islam, the TLP combined sectarian identity with populist discourse, mobilizing voters around a shared sense of religious grievance, consistent with religious populism theory (Brubaker, 2017).

TLP exemplifies the "movement party" model (Kitschelt, 2006; Almeida, 2010), operating at the intersection of street-based activism and formal electoral politics. By combining religious grievances with anti-elitist narratives, the party transformed moral outrage into a populist message that resonated particularly with the Punjab's Barelvi population (Snow, et. al., 2004). The 2017 and 2018 sit-ins, as well as the nationwide protests against the acquittal of Asia Bibi, demonstrate how symbolic actions and moral rhetoric can mobilize large constituencies ("TLP chokes the country," 2018; Hashim, 2017).

Political Opportunity Theory further elucidates TLP's emergence by highlighting the role of institutional and contextual factors. Pakistan's uneven approach toward religious actors oscillating between repression and accommodation created opportunities for TLP to convert street activism into electoral influence (Tarrow, 1998; Snow et al., 2004). The 2017 Faizabad sit-in, where disruptive tactics were tolerated rather than suppressed, exemplifies a favorable political opportunity structure that enhanced the party's legitimacy. Subsequent electoral volatility in 2018 and public disillusionment after the 2022 regime change further expanded the space for TLP's populist messaging (Gallup Pakistan, 2024).

Organizationally, TLP diverges from welfare-oriented Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood by relying on street mobilization, shrine networks and the authority of Barelvi clerics (Singh, 2018; Epping, 2013; Darrag, 2016). By continuously framing political engagement as a moral struggle, the party has cultivated loyalty among lower-middle-class Barelvi youth, who are particularly responsive to sectarian and populist appeals (Ghani, 2018; Haq, 2019). Its strategic use of social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, has amplified its reach, bypassing traditional media and engaging both urban, educated audiences and working-class supporters (Khan, 2018; Yusuf, 2018). This strategy aligns with Brubaker's (2017) observation that religious populism mobilizes support by appealing to shared moral and sacred values.

Electoral results underscore the effectiveness of these strategies. In 2018, TLP secured 2.2 million votes nationwide, emerging as the fifth-largest party and the third-largest in Punjab despite limited seat wins ("How had TLP fared," 2018). By 2024, its vote shares in Punjab had increased to 2.42 million, reflecting the growing resonance of its religious populist message (Gallup Pakistan, 2024). These findings highlight the hybrid character of the TLP: a movement maintaining the symbolic and

moral authority of protest activism while also participating in a formal electoral process, consistent with the movement-party framework (Kitschelt, 2006; Minkenberg, 2018).

By integrating religious populism theory and political opportunity theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework to understand the rise of the TLP. Religious populism theory explains how the party mobilized identity, grievance and symbolic politics to define its constituency as morally and religiously distinct (Brubaker, 2017), while political opportunity theory explains how state responses, elite alignments and electoral crises created avenues for electoral influence (Brubaker, 2017), etc., 2004). Together, these perspectives illuminate the TLP's dual role as both a protest movement and a political party, reshaping electoral contestation and democratic dynamics in Punjab.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses religious populism theory as its primary lens, complemented by insights from political opportunity theory, to explain the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in Punjab during the 2018 and 2024 general elections.

Religious Populism Theory

Roger Brubaker (2017) conceptualizes religious populism as a distinct form of populist politics in which the “people” are defined not only against corrupt elites but also in explicitly religious terms. Here, the political community is framed as a sacred entity, threatened by tyrannical rulers and external powers. This structure is particularly relevant in the case of TLP, which mobilized support by presenting itself as the protector of the honour of the Prophet (PBUH) and the defender of Islamic sanctity. Its leaders, notably Khadim Hussain Rizvi, employed a rhetoric that combined populist anti-elite discourse with Bareilvi sectarian identity. Brubaker's theory (2017) provides an analytical framework for understanding how TLP transformed religious grievances into a public narrative that resonated deeply with Punjab's voters.

Political Opportunity Theory

Although the ideological structure was central to TLP's success, its rapid electoral emergence must also be understood within the broader institutional and political context. Political Opportunity Theory (Tarrow, 1998; Snow et. al., 2004) emphasizes how changes in state structure, elite alignments and systemic crises open or limit opportunities for new political actors. In Pakistan, the state's contradictory stance towards alternative religious groups, shifting between repression and accommodation, created such opportunities. The 2017 Faizabad sit-in, where the military tolerated rather than repressed TLP's subversive tactics, legitimized the party in popular circles. The electoral instability in 2018 and the widespread disillusionment following the 2022 regime change crisis further expanded the space for the TLP's populist message. Political Opportunity Theory thus helps explain why the TLP was able to transform symbolic street power into electoral influence.

INTEGRATING THE FRAMEWORKS

By combining the Religious Populism Theory with the Political Opportunity Theory, this study captures both the ideological framework and the institutional conditions that facilitated the rise of the TLP. Religious populism explains how the TLP mobilized emotions, sectarian identities and symbolic politics to present itself as an authentic representative of Pakistan's religious majority.

Political Opportunity Theory complements this by showing how state actions, party system fragmentation and electoral crises created favourable opportunities for the TLP to enter formal politics. Together, these perspectives provide a robust framework for analyzing how the TLP straddles the boundary between protest movement and political party, reshaping the dynamics of electoral competition and democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Although the TLP has been active in the Barelvi political arena, its transition from a movement to a party, while maintaining its original character, mirrors the development of other religious-political actors in Pakistan. For example, though Jamat e Islami (JI), despite entering the political sphere, has remained a movement in Pakistan through its humanitarian work, medical services and educational initiatives (Bano, 2012).

In Pakistan's electoral history, religious-political parties have had limited success, with only two instances of forming provincial governments: JUI, led by Mufti Mehmood, formed the government in KP in 1972 and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party religious alliance led by Qazi Hussain Ahmed, formed the governments in KP and Balochistan in the 2002 election (Grare, 2006). As a result, religious-political actors in Pakistan continue to exert informal pressure on the governments to comply with their religious demands.

TLP has gone through two stages since its founding, keeping its movement identity while transitioning into a political party. The movement was originally named Tehreek Rihai Mumtaz Qadri (Movement to release Mumtaz Qadri) before being renamed Tehreek-e- Labaik Ya Rasoolullah (TLYRA) following his hanging in 2016 and later changing to TLP, a political party.

In the first phase, TLP articulated the Barelvi community's sense of estrangement and raise awareness of its complaints by organizing protests, taking over public squares and holding sit-ins (Niloufer, 2017). In the second phase, TLP formally transitioned into political party to properly introduce its demands (Chughtai & Hashim, 2018). In the political sphere, TLP provided its perception of the world while presenting the major problem (Khatm-e-Nabuwat) as being in opposition to the other sects, especially the Deobandis. Crucially, TLP not only opposes Deobandis, but it also emphasizes exclusion within the Barelvi community to differentiate itself from other Barelvi political groups that have forged partnerships with other religious organizations like MMA and other mainstream political parties in Pakistan (Singh, 2018).

To put pressure on the government, TLP resorts to street protests when its political demands are unmet. For example, TLP led protests against Asia Bibi, a Christian woman wrongfully accused of blasphemy and released by the Supreme Court in October 2018 (Web Desk, 2018). Politically, TLP opposes pro-minority legislation and backs initiatives to bolster blasphemy laws within its electoral manifesto calling for the death penalty for anyone seeking to change Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

TLP's grassroots support comes from the lower-middle-class Barelvi youth, who are also active on social media (Ghani, 2018). The current polarised political climate in Pakistan has produced these young, lower-middle-class Barelvis, who are more likely to engage in violence and vigilantism. By exposing them to a narrow and sectarian approach to political action, TLP has successfully mobilized this segment of the Barelvi population (Haq, 2019).

The blatant encouragement of agitation by TLP leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi is the root cause of the party's violent activities and politics (Naila, 2018). As previously mentioned, TLP's base of support primarily consists of young, impressionable people from the lower middle class. Every time the TLP leadership issues a call for protest, supporters attack cars, burn tires, block major highways and destroy both government and private property to express their rage and frustration (Niloufer, 2017). Religious fanaticism and social discontent combine to create a volatile mix. In hindsight, TLP's decision to take an agitational active stance was also influenced by the inability of other Barelvi groups to accomplish their political objectives and protect communal interests through nonviolent activism.

The blasphemy laws enacted by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1984, which made blasphemy against major religions, including the Prophet Muhammad, punishable by death, have since been used by various Islamist groups to justify their foreign policy against Ahmadis and other religious minorities in Pakistan. However, TLP has attempted to recast blasphemy activism as its exclusive domain. Since 2011, Rizvi has led numerous public rallies in support of the blasphemy laws, earning him the title of 'blasphemy activist' (Ali, 2017). TLP did this deliberately not only to oppose the Deobandi but also to distinguish itself from other Barelvi groups that are willing to ally with other religious political parties in Pakistan.

TLP's top leadership has vowed to defend the blasphemy laws with their lives. In its election manifesto, the party has called for the death penalty for anyone proposing amendments to these laws (Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, 2018; 2024). TLP leaders have criticized not only the government for trying to soften the blasphemy laws but also Deobandi clerics like Maulana Tariq Jameel and Maulana Fazlur Rehman for not raising their voices and protesting against the proposed amendments to the 2017 Election Bill.

The TLP, as a movement, engages in agitation, mass protests and rallies. In 2016, during Qadri's Chehlum (a ceremony held on the fortieth day of his death), an estimated 2,000 TLP protesters entered the Red Zone area of Islamabad and staged a sit-in (Rana, 2017). They demanded, among others, that the government declare Qadri a hero, convert his prison cell into a national heritage site, dismiss Ahmadi community members from government jobs and execute Asia Bibi. The sit-in ended after negotiations between the government and the TLP, marking the beginning of the TLP's era of agitational politics.

In November 2017, TLP staged another sit-in, blocking the main highway connecting Rawalpindi and Islamabad, in protest against changes in the wording of the oath taken by parliamentarians and voters (Hashim, 2017). In the Election Bill 2017, the wording of the oath was changed from 'I solemnly swear' to 'I declare'. Although this amendment was later reversed, the TLP still demanded the resignation of the then Law Minister Zahid Hamid. After the police failed to disperse the TLP protesters, the government sought help from the Pakistan Army. However, the army, with its chief, refused to use force against the TLP, saying, 'we cannot use force against our own people.' (Sikander, 2017). Instead, the army encouraged the government to engage in dialogue with the TLP.

THE RISE OF TLP AS A POLITICAL PARTY

Despite its active role in the Barelvi political arena, TLP's transformation from a movement to a party is generally consistent with the trajectory of other religious political actors in Pakistan. For example, even after entering politics, JI has remained a movement through its social work, medical services and educational initiatives (Bano, 2012). Similarly, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Middle Eastern Muslim Brotherhood have also maintained their movement identities while engaging in politics (Darrag, 2016). Religious political parties have performed poorly in Pakistan's electoral history. Religious political parties in Pakistan have only managed to form provincial governments twice. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party religious alliance led by Qazi Hussain Ahmed, formed governments in KP and Balochistan in the 2002 elections, after the JUI-F led by Mufti Mahmood had formed a government in KP in 1972 (Grare, 2006). As a result, religious political actors in Pakistan continue to exert informal pressure on governments to comply with their religious demands.

Since its inception, TLP has undergone two phases, evolving from a movement into a political party while keeping its original identity. Initially named Tehreek Rihai Mumtaz Qadri (Movement to release Mumtaz Qadri), the movement was renamed Tehreek-e-Labaik Ya Rasoolullah (TLRYA) following Qadri's execution in 2016, before eventually adopting the name TLP as a political party.

In its first phase, TLP sought to voice the Barelvi community's feelings of estrangement and raise awareness about their complaints through protests, sit-ins and public demonstrations (Niloufer, 2017). To properly introduce its demands into the political sphere, it changed its name to a political party in the second phase (Chughtai & Hashim, 2018). Within the political sphere, TLP emphasized the Khatm-e-Nabuwat issue, portraying it as a major conflict, especially with the Deobandi sect. In the process, it has demonstrated the traits of charismatic leadership, which gives the party organizational stability and allows it to operate in an authoritarian manner.

TLP is characterized by its active involvement in ongoing contention and continual, non-episodic confrontation with its enemies, consistent with Minkenberg's observations. TLP demonstrates oppositional politics and agitational actions, constantly entering and exiting the system. Crucially, TLP not only opposes Deobandis but it also emphasizes exclusion within the Barelvi community to differentiate itself from other Barelvi political groups that have forged partnerships with other religious organizations like MMA and other mainstream political parties in Pakistan (Minkenberg, 2018).

TLP goes to the streets to pressure the government when it feels that its demands are not being realized in the political arena. The TLP's protests against Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was wrongly accused of blasphemy and released by SC in October 2018 ("TLP chokes country," 2018), serve as an example. In the political sphere, TLP opposes pro-minority legislation and backs initiatives to bolster blasphemy laws. For example, the TLP's election manifesto calls for the death penalty for anyone who wants to change Pakistan's blasphemy laws (Ahmed, 2018).

The lower-middle-class youth of the Barelvi population, who are also active on social media, provide TLP with its grassroots support. These young Barelvis from the lower middle class are a byproduct of Pakistan's current divisive political climate and are prone to vigilantism. This segment

of the Barelvi population has been targeted by TLP, which has made them aware of a limited and sectarian approach to political engagement.

Rise of TLP in Punjab's Political Landscape

Punjab, being the largest province in terms of population has a predominant position on the political chessboard of Pakistan. In terms of parliamentary numbers, Punjab has 148 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan. In addition, under the women's quota, Punjab has 35 seats. For decades, the electoral demography of Punjab is symbolic that whoever rules Punjab tends to dominate in the center as well. Elections trends across Pakistan vary in terms of voting behavior and the culture of participation in politics. Voting behavior and electoral choices in Pakistan are a combination of psychological, sociological, socio-economic and political realities. Political mobilization and electoral campaigns predetermine the participatory culture in the society influencing electoral trends that significantly impact the state's overall democratic culture. Electoral contestations in Punjab are mainly derived from multifaceted factors including party affiliations, local groupings, caste, sectarian division, family ties and personality-specific support.

In this context TLP, while retaining its identity as a movement, registered as a political party and contested the 2018 elections, encouraged by the success of the Faizabad sit-in and its strong showing in the Lahore by-election, following the disqualification of then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Though TLP secured 2.2 million votes, making it the fifth largest political party in Pakistan and the third largest in Punjab, it did not form electoral alliances with any political party in order to present its brand of Barelvi politics within a purely sectarian framework, unlike the JUP, which partnered with the MMA (Singh, 2018).

There were two primary reasons why TLP was able to garner clandestine backing from various segments of the Pakistani government. First, following the APS incident in Peshawar and the Red Mosque revolt in Islamabad, the authorities looked for Sufi organizations to fight back against Deobandi armed groups. TLP and a number of other groups benefited from this shift. Second, TLP gained political leverage through the tensions between the "deep state" and the PMLN government, further strengthening the party's position with the military establishment's attempts to support various religions (Dawn, 2018).

The PMLN cooperated with the military's former Deobandi proxy party, JUIF, as an electoral ally in the run-up to the 2018 elections. Behind the scenes, the PMLN also supported efforts to merge Professor Sajid Mir's Markazi Jamiat Ahle Hadith and Maulana Ibtisam Elahi Zaheer's Jamiat-ul-Hadith Pakistan, in order to strengthen the Salafi vote (Alam, 2018). This political maneuver stood in contrast to the military's attempt to support the more fundamentalist and extremist Milli Muslim League (MML), which represented a harder line on religious issues. Meanwhile, the political wing of Hafiz Saeed's Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) viewed Nawaz Sharif's stance on military as being contradictory, perceiving him as tough on militant groups focused on India, yet too lenient on domestic elements that posed a threat to Pakistan's security.

Charismatic Leadership

From a lower-middle-class Punjabi family, Khadim Hussain Rizvi has gained the admiration of his supporters as a dynamic leader. He drew large crowds, spoke with grace and immediately

established a connection with his supporters, leading them straight to demonstrations and agitations. In Punjab and Sindh, Rizvi gained popularity among the middle and lower middle classes due to his usage of Punjabi slang and informal language (Ali, 2017).

Barelvis' political views were altered after Rizvi's successful 2017 Faizabad sit-in. The notion that Barelvis were merely "shrine goers" with little to no potential for success in mainstream politics, was dispelled. "Barelvis have been subjected to suppression for over a century and the reverse of that phenomenon has started," Rizvi stated in a statement following the 2017 Faizabad sit-in. The voice of the majority will finally win out, even though it will take some time.

With a compelling political narrative, Rizvi unified Barelvi vote bank, distinguishing him from his peers, including Sahibzada Hamid Raza of the Sunni Ittehad Council, Anas Noorani of JUP-N and Riaz Hussain Shah of Jamaat Ahl-e-Sunnat (JAS) ("The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism," 2024). In contrast to them, Rizvi has given Barelvis a story that speaks to them, connects with them on an emotional level and gave them a useful political platform.

The concept states that narratives should be thrilling, emotionally compelling and promising a solution. By opposing the implementation of Nizam-e-Mustafa and any resisting changes to blasphemy laws, Rizvi offered redemption to his followers and the larger Barelvi community in the fight to preserve the sanctity of the Prophet Muhammad.

Effective Use of Social Media

The TLP has effectively used social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to expand its support base and effectively disseminate its political narrative (Khan, 2018). Videos of Rizvi taken during two sit-ins in 2017 and 2018 have gone viral on social media, further amplifying the party's reach. Through social media, Rizvi's lectures and speeches are accessible to thousands of TLP followers, combining religious messages with their political views (Yousuf, 2018). Through the internet, the TLP has been able to expand into areas of society that are inaccessible to its networks of madrassas and mosques. Although the majority of TLP supporters come from the working and laboring classes, social media has also garnered considerable support from the urban, educated class. The party's social media accounts are managed by these supporters. The TLP effectively used social media channels to rally its followers throughout Pakistan in 2017 and 2018, even though mainstream media refused to cover the rallies and sit-ins (Pakistan Today, 2017). Despite the media blockade, the TLP has used social media as an alternative medium to perfection, as evidenced by the rapidity with which it shuttered Pakistan's major cities (Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi) and blocked the nation's vital highways (Malik, 2018).

TLP's Electoral Performance During General Elections

In Pakistan's political landscape, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has risen rapidly, shocking many with its high level of electoral participation. The TLP, which was founded by Islamic academics who supported Mumtaz Hussain Qadri, rose to prominence following a sit-in in Islamabad in 2017 that compelled the PML-N government to fire its federal law minister. The TLP overtook the PPP in the 2018 general elections and became the fifth-largest party in the country after garnering significant vote share in Punjab. The PML-N's support base in Punjab was severely damaged by the TLP's campaign targeted against them. The TLP is still a significant force in

Pakistan's religio-political scene, even after a crackdown and the death of its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi in 2020 (Ghauri, 2024).

The TLP leadership quickly found Punjab as a stronghold, with the province accounting for four out of every five votes the party received. In the Punjab Assembly elections, the TLP placed third, outperforming the Pakistan People's Party, which came in fourth. Of the 121 candidates TLP put forth in the National Assembly elections for 139 of Punjab's 141 seats, managed to secure third place. 9 out of the 262 candidates, TLP put forward for the 297 Punjab Assembly territorial seats were women. In one constituency, PP-71 Hafizabad-III, a TLP candidate finished second; in other elections, 88 of them placed third, while another 82 finished fourth.

For a party in its first general election, this was an outstanding showing. In contrast, the oldest party in the nation, the Pakistan People's Party, won six national seats in Punjab and finished second in another six, but its candidates only placed third in 27 national constituencies inside the province. In Punjab, the TLP also defeated its rival religious parties by a significant margin. The coalition that has controlled religious party elections for the past 20 years, Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA), received a pitiful 0.43 million votes in the Punjab Assembly elections, whereas the TLP received almost 1.9 million ("How Had TLP," 2018).

In the 2018 elections, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) received 2.2 million votes, making them the fifth-largest party in the country. Election data analysis shows that the TLP's votes had a major influence on the results in several National Assembly seats, especially in Punjab. The PML- N might have added about 13 seats if TLP voters had backed them. On the other hand, the PML- N would have lost important seats if the PTI had received the votes cast by the TLP. This demonstrates how the TLP changed the course of the 2018 general elections and had a significant impact. In the 2024 elections, 2.42 million Punjabis cast ballots for the TLP, which is 0.84 million more than the 1.58 million total votes cast in the 2018 elections. Except Gujranwala Division, where the vote share fell by 0.2%, all divisions recorded increases in both votes and vote share from 2018 and 2024 (Gallup Pakistan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The electoral rise of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) underscores the growing importance of religious populism in Pakistan's political system. By transforming from a protest movement to a political party, the TLP has blurred the boundaries between street activism and institutional politics. Its ability to mobilize around the politics of blasphemy issues, along with building Bareilvi identity as an underrepresented communal voice, have enabled party to build a distinct support base in Punjab. The 2018 and 2024 general elections demonstrated that even without winning a large number of seats, the TLP has transformed the competitive landscape by winning millions of votes, fragmenting the party's traditional support base and positioning itself as a disruptive actor within the democratic system.

Equally important is the party's use of populist rhetoric and mobilization strategies that resonate strongly with lower- and middle-class constituencies. Through charismatic leadership, symbolic religious appeals and strategic use of social media, the TLP has developed a lasting ability to influence public discourse and challenge mainstream actors. While its presence has opened new

avenues of political participation for Bareilvi communities, it has also reinforced the politics of sectarian polarization and agitation.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the TLP illustrates how religious populism is reshaping Pakistan's democratic process. Its hybrid character as both a movement and a party demonstrate the fluidity of political organization in contexts where religion and politics are deeply intertwined. Whether the TLP evolves into a more institutionalized political actor or remains a primarily protest-based force, it will have far-reaching implications for the stability and inclusiveness of Pakistan's democratic future.

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