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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18726827>**The Bhutto Dynasty and the Pakistan People's Party: Populism, Power, and Tragedy****Asifa Zafar**Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages,
Islamabadazafar@numl.edu.pk**Dr. Farhat Nasim**Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages
Islamabadfnaseem@numl.edu.pk**Abstract**

This article examines the Bhutto dynasty and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as a central paradox in Pakistani politics, tracing their evolution from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's 1967 founding of the party amid anti-establishment populism to its contemporary role under Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. It analyzes how the PPP's left-leaning ideology, encapsulated in "Roti, Kapra, Makaan," mobilized masses against elite and military dominance, delivering landmark achievements like the 1973 Constitution and women's rights advancements under Benazir Bhutto, while grappling with authoritarian drifts, corruption allegations, dynastic succession, and recurrent tragedies including executions, assassinations, and coups that have shaped Pakistan's turbulent democratic trajectory. The study highlights the party's shift from revolutionary populism to pragmatic coalition politics, regional entrenchment in Sindh, and efforts at revival amid military influence and declining national appeal. Ultimately, it argues that the Bhutto-PPP saga embodies both inspiration for progressive resistance and a cautionary tale of how charismatic mobilization, intertwined with familial control and praetorian structures, impedes consolidated democracy, underscoring the need for institutionalized parties beyond dynastic legacies to foster sustainable civilian rule and social equity in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Bhutto Dynasty, Pakistan People's Party, Political Populism, Dynastic Politics, Civil-Military Relations, Democratic Tragedy.*

Introduction

The Bhutto family stands as one of Pakistan's most influential and tragic political dynasties, embodying both extraordinary ambition and profound personal cost in the nation's volatile political landscape. Originating from a prominent Sindhi landowning background, the family's ascent began with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who rose from a cabinet minister under General Ayub Khan to become a charismatic challenger to the military-dominated establishment. His daughter Benazir Bhutto became the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority nation as prime minister, while subsequent generations including her husband Asif Ali Zardari and son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari have sustained the family's grip on the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Yet this legacy is marred by unrelenting tragedy, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's execution in 1979 under General Zia-ul-Haq, the suspicious deaths of his sons Shahnawaz (poisoned in 1985) and Murtaza (shot by police in 1996), and Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007 by a suicide bomber amid her political comeback. These events underscore a pattern of violent confrontations with state power structures, where personal sacrifice has intertwined with political endurance (Bennett-Jones, 2020). The dynasty's influence persists, particularly in Sindh province, but it has often

reinforced perceptions of feudal dominance in Pakistani politics, even as it champions progressive causes.

Founded in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto amid widespread discontent with Ayub Khan's authoritarian regime, the Pakistan People's Party emerged as a vehicle for left-leaning populism that promised radical transformation. The PPP's founding manifesto blended socialist economics with Islamic identity, encapsulated in the iconic slogan "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" (bread, clothing, shelter), which directly addressed the material deprivation of the working class, peasants, and urban poor. This rhetoric mobilized massive support during the 1968–1969 anti-Ayub protests and propelled the party to victory in West Pakistan in the 1970 general elections. Bhutto's populist appeal combined anti-elite sentiment, promises of nationalization, land reform, and empowerment of the marginalized, marking a departure from the elite-dominated politics of the early post-independence era (Lodhi, 1980/2024). The party's rise reflected broader regional populist waves, drawing parallels to leftist movements elsewhere in South Asia, while incorporating Islamic elements to broaden its base (Sekine, 1992, as cited in recent analyses; see also Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). This foundational ideology positioned the PPP as a mass-based alternative to military and bureaucratic control, yet it also sowed seeds of tension with entrenched institutions.

At its core, the Bhutto dynasty and the PPP illustrate a profound paradox in Pakistani politics: the fusion of mass mobilization and genuine democratic aspirations with authoritarian tendencies, dynastic succession, and recurrent violent clashes with the establishment. The populist surge under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto delivered Pakistan's 1973 Constitution and initiatives like nationalization, but his rule devolved into centralized control, suppression of opposition, and electoral manipulation, culminating in the 1977 coup and his execution. Subsequent generations faced similar cycles: Benazir's terms marked by dismissals on corruption charges and exile, followed by her martyrdom, and the party's pragmatic shifts under Zardari and Bilawal amid declining national influence. This trajectory has shaped Pakistan's turbulent democratic history, highlighting how charismatic populism can challenge military hegemony yet often reinforce personalized power and institutional fragility (Bennett-Jones, 2020; Hughes, 2021). The Bhutto-PPP saga thus serves as both an inspiration for progressive politics and a cautionary tale of how pursuit of power, amid structural praetorianism, perpetuates tragedy and impedes consolidated democracy.

Literature Review

The scholarly landscape on the Bhutto dynasty and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is rich with biographical, historical, and analytical works that trace the family's ascent from feudal roots to national prominence, often framing their story as a microcosm of Pakistan's postcolonial struggles. Salmaan Taseer's (1979) seminal biography, *Bhutto: A Political Biography*, portrays Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as a charismatic yet flawed architect of socialist populism, drawing on firsthand insights to explore his break from the Ayub regime and the PPP's 1967 founding as a mass-mobilizing force against elitism. More recent analyses, such as Farzana Shaikh's (2018) *Making Sense of Pakistan*, situate the PPP within broader identity politics, critiquing how Bhutto's Islamic socialism evolved into a tool for personal power amid ethnic and sectarian divides. Victoria Schofield's (2020) memoir-infused *The Fragrance of Tears: My Friendship with Benazir Bhutto* offers an intimate lens on Benazir's leadership, emphasizing her exile years and gender-barrier-breaking premierships (1988-1990, 1993-1996), while highlighting the party's shift from radicalism to pragmatism. Adeel Khan's (2005) *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* examines the PPP's evolution,

particularly its Sindh-centric retreat post-Benazir, underscoring how dynastic control has diluted its national leftist appeal. These works collectively illuminate the PPP's transformation from a revolutionary outfit to a familial fiefdom, blending archival rigor with narrative depth to dissect its enduring yet diminished role in Pakistani politics.

Central themes in the literature revolve around the tension between left-wing populism and authoritarian drift during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era, where his regime's initial egalitarian promises clashed with repressive governance. Hina Shamshad's (2025) analysis in *From Populism to Political Polarization: Bhutto's Role in Shaping Modern Pakistani Politics* argues that Bhutto's "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" mantra mobilized the disenfranchised but morphed into Bonapartist control, evidenced by nationalizations (1972-1977) that empowered state elites while suppressing dissent, ultimately inviting the 1977 coup. This echoes Abbasi et al.'s (2020) framework of "elitist authoritarianism to Bonapartist populism," positing Bhutto's rule as a pivot from military-backed oligarchy to personalized autocracy, where populist rhetoric masked institutional erosion. Fizza Batool's (2023) comparative study in *Populism in Pakistan: The Exclusionary-Inclusionary Divide* dissects how Bhutto's inclusionary appeals to the masses excluded ethnic minorities, fostering polarization that prefigured later Islamist surges. These themes underscore a scholarly consensus: Bhutto's populism democratized discourse but entrenched authoritarian precedents, complicating Pakistan's civil-military equilibrium and setting the stage for the PPP's ideological dilution.

Subsequent literature shifts focus to Benazir Bhutto's era, emphasizing gender, democracy, exile, and dynastic politics amid persistent civil-military tensions, often drawing parallels to global dynasties like the Kennedys and Gandhis. Muhammad Azeem's (2024) *Revisiting Benazir Bhutto and Her Contribution to Restore Democracy in Pakistan* highlights her post-1979 exile as a crucible for feminist leadership, framing her Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) campaigns and premierships as battles against patriarchal militarism, though marred by corruption allegations and dismissals. Ian Talbot's (2022) examination of civil-military dialectics portrays the PPP under Benazir as resilient yet subordinated, with her governments navigating military oversight while advancing women's rights, such as through the 1990s Hudood Ordinance reforms. Comparisons abound: Owen Bennett-Jones (2008) likens the Bhuttos' tragic charisma to the Kennedys' "curse," while Shaikh (2018) contrasts their feudal volatility with the Gandhis' institutional stability, noting how dynastic succession under Asif Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has accelerated the PPP's decline into regionalism. Siegfried O. Wolf's (2023) critique of dynastic entrenchment argues that familial control has weakened internal democracy, exacerbating military dominance and the party's national irrelevance since 2013.

Despite these insights, significant gaps persist in the literature, particularly regarding an integrated analysis of the populism-power-tragedy nexus across generations and the PPP's evolving contemporary role amid Pakistan's hybrid democracy. While works like Xiaoyan Wu's (2020) *The Novel Changes in Pakistan's Party Politics* identify the PPP's multi-party marginalization post-2008, they overlook how tragedy executions, assassinations, and exiles has mythologized the Bhuttos, sustaining voter loyalty in Sindh but hindering programmatic renewal. Few studies, such as Batool's (2023), holistically link Zulfikar's authoritarianism to Benazir's democratic aspirations and Bilawal's youth-oriented pragmatism, often treating generations in isolation. Moreover, the PPP's current adaptation to digital populism, coalition politics, and economic crises remains underexplored, with scant attention to its potential revival or obsolescence in a PTI-dominated landscape. Addressing these voids requires

interdisciplinary approaches blending political economy, gender studies, and comparative dynasty analyses to fully grasp the PPP's paradoxical legacy in fostering yet frustrating democratic consolidation.

Problem Statement

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967, initially emerged as a powerful vehicle for left-leaning populism, mobilizing the masses with promises of economic redistribution, social justice, and empowerment of the marginalized through its iconic slogan "Roti, Kapra, Makaan." This rhetoric challenged the entrenched military-bureaucratic elite and feudal structures, enabling the PPP to achieve unprecedented electoral success in West Pakistan and usher in civilian rule after the 1971 dismemberment crisis. However, the party's trajectory reveals a profound paradox at the heart of Pakistani politics: while it championed democratic aspirations and mass participation, its exercise of power under Bhutto devolved into authoritarian centralization, suppression of opposition, electoral manipulation, and reliance on patrimonial networks, culminating in the 1977 military coup and his execution. Subsequent generations perpetuated this cycle Benazir Bhutto's premierships advanced gender-inclusive reforms and democratic restoration yet faced repeated dismissals amid corruption allegations and civil-military confrontations, while later leadership under Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has entrenched dynastic control, regionalized the party's base in Sindh, and diminished its national populist appeal amid persistent institutional fragility and military dominance. Despite inspiring progressive politics and symbolizing resistance to praetorianism, the Bhutto dynasty and PPP have inadvertently reinforced elite capture, personalized rule, and tragic confrontations with the establishment executions, assassinations, exiles, and violent deaths that undermine democratic consolidation, highlighting how charismatic populism, when intertwined with dynastic succession and structural praetorianism, perpetuates instability rather than sustainable institutionalization in Pakistan's turbulent political history.

Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of the Bhutto dynasty and PPP from founding to the present.
2. To analyze the role of populist ideology in mobilizing support and shaping policy.
3. To examine the exercise of power, including governance successes/failures and civil-military relations.
4. To explore the pattern of personal and political tragedies and their impact on the party's legacy and Pakistani democracy.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance and future prospects of the Bhutto-led PPP.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical and political analysis grounded primarily in secondary sources, including scholarly biographies, academic books and journal articles, official PPP manifestos and party documents, contemporary media reports from reputable outlets, and available archival records such as parliamentary debates, election commission materials, and government publications. The approach adopts a thematic framework that integrates chronological narration of key events across the Bhutto dynasty's generations with targeted analytical lenses drawn from populism theory (examining charismatic mobilization, anti-elite rhetoric, and inclusionary/exclusionary dynamics), dynastic politics (focusing on familial succession, patrimonialism, and leadership personalization), and civil-military relations (analyzing recurring confrontations, coups, dismissals, and power-sharing bargains).

Where accessible and relevant, primary sources such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's and Benazir Bhutto's public speeches, party resolutions, and select correspondence are incorporated to enrich interpretive depth and provide direct insight into ideological framing and strategic discourse. This methodological design facilitates a nuanced reconstruction of the interplay between populist appeal, power consolidation, and tragic outcomes while maintaining analytical rigor through cross-verification of sources and attention to contextual contingencies in Pakistan's postcolonial political evolution. Key limitations include heavy reliance on published accounts, which may reflect inherent biases in pro-Bhutto sympathetic narratives or anti-Bhutto establishment critiques, potentially skewing interpretive balance; additionally, the elite-centric focus emphasizing leadership decisions, institutional interactions, and high-level events limits engagement with grassroots ethnographic data, voter-level perceptions, or localized mobilization processes that could offer complementary perspectives on the PPP's societal embeddedness and long-term transformations.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the Founding of the PPP

The rise of populism under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto marked a seismic shift in Pakistan's political landscape, emerging from his decisive break with the authoritarian regime of General Muhammad Ayub Khan and culminating in the founding of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1967. As a former foreign minister in Ayub's cabinet, Bhutto grew disillusioned with the regime's elitist policies, which favored military-bureaucratic alliances and suppressed mass participation, prompting his resignation in 1966 amid widespread unrest over the Tashkent Agreement and economic disparities. This rupture positioned Bhutto as a champion of the disenfranchised, channeling anti-establishment fervor into the PPP's creation at a Lahore convention, where the party's socialist-leaning manifesto promised radical reforms like land redistribution, nationalization of industries, and empowerment of workers and peasants. Drawing on Islamic socialism a blend of egalitarian ideals with religious rhetoric Bhutto's vision resonated in a post-colonial context rife with feudal exploitation and urban poverty, transforming the PPP into a mass-based movement that challenged the oligarchic status quo (Shaukat & Zahir, 2025). Analytically, this founding moment exemplified populism's dual edge: while it democratized political discourse by mobilizing previously marginalized groups, it also sowed seeds of personalized leadership, as Bhutto's charisma overshadowed institutional party-building, foreshadowing later authoritarian drifts (Abdul Sattar & Hussain, 2024). By framing the PPP as the voice of the "awam" (people) against the "ashrafiya" (elite), Bhutto not only disrupted Ayub's "decade of development" narrative but also ignited a populist wave that redefined electoral politics in Pakistan.

Bhutto's populist appeal was masterfully crafted through evocative slogans, aggressive anti-elite rhetoric, and policies aimed at uplifting the rural and urban poor, cementing the PPP's dominance as a vehicle for social transformation. The iconic mantra "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" (bread, clothing, shelter) encapsulated a direct assault on inequality, promising basic necessities to the masses while vilifying landlords, industrialists, and military-backed elites as exploiters of the common man. This rhetoric, infused with Islamic symbolism to broaden appeal in a predominantly Muslim society, positioned Bhutto as a messianic figure bridging socialism and faith, as seen in his calls for "Musawat-e-Muhammadi" (equality inspired by Prophet Muhammad). Nationalization policies post-1971, targeting banks, insurance firms, and key industries, further amplified this populism by redistributing economic power, albeit selectively, to state control under the guise of empowering the proletariat (Batool, 2025). Thematically, this approach highlighted populism's inclusionary façade rallying peasants,

laborers, and ethnic minorities against a homogenized "corrupt elite" while masking exclusionary undertones, such as marginalizing ethnic nationalists in East Pakistan, which contributed to the 1971 crisis (Ullah et al., 2024). Analytically strong, Bhutto's strategy drew from global third-wave populism, adapting Latin American models to South Asian contexts, yet it risked institutional erosion by prioritizing charismatic mobilization over sustainable reforms, ultimately alienating allies and inviting backlash from conservative forces.

The pinnacle of Bhutto's populist ascent came with the PPP's sweeping victory in the 1970 elections in West Pakistan, leading to his rule from 1971 to 1977, a period of notable achievements overshadowed by mounting controversies and culminating in his tragic downfall. Assuming power after the Bangladesh secession, Bhutto oversaw the promulgation of the 1973 Constitution, which established parliamentary democracy and initiated Pakistan's nuclear program as a symbol of national sovereignty and technological empowerment. These feats bolstered his image as a defender of the people against external threats and internal inequities, yet his governance increasingly veered toward authoritarianism, including the suppression of opposition through the Federal Security Force, rigging allegations in provincial elections, and curbs on press freedom (Shaukat & Zahir, 2025). The 1977 elections, marred by widespread fraud claims, sparked the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) movement a coalition of right-wing and Islamist parties that exploited religious sentiments to counter Bhutto's secular populism leading to nationwide protests and General Zia-ul-Haq's coup on July 5, 1977. Bhutto's subsequent trial on murder charges, widely viewed as politically motivated, ended in his execution on April 4, 1979, under Zia's martial law regime (Abdul Sattar & Hussain, 2024). This downfall underscored the fragility of populist rule in praetorian states: while Bhutto's mass mobilization advanced democratic aspirations, his centralization of power and confrontations with the military-judicial establishment perpetuated cycles of instability, eroding institutional checks and paving the way for Islamization and prolonged authoritarianism (Shahid & Rashid, 2025).

Resilience, Return, and Repeated Tragedy

Benazir Bhutto's exile following her father's execution in 1979 and the brutal suppression under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime forged a powerful martyrdom narrative that revitalized the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as a symbol of democratic resistance. Imprisoned repeatedly and enduring harsh solitary confinement, Benazir transformed personal suffering into political capital, emerging as the embodiment of defiance against military authoritarianism. Her self-imposed exile in the mid-1980s allowed her to build international alliances, mobilize diaspora support, and lead the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) from abroad, framing the PPP not merely as a party but as a familial legacy of sacrifice for civilian rule. Upon her triumphant return in 1986, greeted by massive crowds chanting her name, Benazir harnessed this narrative to position the PPP as the primary vehicle for ending Zia's Islamization and martial law legacies. Analytically, this resurgence exemplified how tragedy can sustain populist momentum: the martyrdom motif rooted in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's judicial murder infused the party with emotional legitimacy, enabling it to survive institutional decapitation and rally the masses around themes of justice, democracy, and anti-establishment fervor (Azeem, 2024). Thematically, Benazir's leadership bridged her father's socialist populism with a gendered appeal for empowerment, broadening the PPP's base while reinforcing dynastic continuity as essential to the party's survival in Pakistan's praetorian landscape.

Benazir Bhutto's two premierships (1988–1990 and 1993–1996) represented a partial revival of populist policies tempered by pragmatic governance, advancing women's rights and foreign policy realignments amid persistent institutional constraints and corruption scandals that precipitated her dismissals. In her first term, she prioritized social welfare expansions, including rural health initiatives and education access for the underprivileged, while championing women's empowerment through appointments to high offices and efforts to amend discriminatory Hudood Ordinances. Foreign policy shifted toward pragmatic engagement with the West and cautious *détente* with India, contrasting her father's confrontational style. Her second tenure saw renewed focus on poverty alleviation and infrastructure, yet both periods were undermined by governance challenges: coalition instability, economic pressures, and allegations of nepotism centered on her husband Asif Ali Zardari. Presidents Ghulam Ishaq Khan (1990) and Farooq Leghari (1996) invoked Article 58(2)(b) to dismiss her governments on charges of corruption and maladministration, reflecting deep civil-military tensions and elite rivalries (Ali, 2025). Analytically vigorous, these terms highlight the paradox of populist inheritance: while Benazir advanced progressive reforms particularly gender equity in a conservative society her administrations' centralization and patronage networks echoed authoritarian drifts, eroding public trust and inviting establishment interventions that perpetuated democratic fragility.

Dynastic control intensified under Benazir, with family roles shaping PPP internal dynamics and contributing to tragic fractures, exemplified by her mother Nusrat Bhutto's sidelining and the violent death of her brother Murtaza Bhutto in 1996. Nusrat, who initially co-chaired the PPP post-Zulfikar's execution, gradually ceded influence to Benazir amid ideological and personal rifts, particularly after supporting Murtaza's claim to leadership during his 1993 return from exile. Murtaza, founder of the militant Al-Zulfiqar Organization, positioned himself as the authentic heir to their father's radical legacy, criticizing Benazir's alleged compromises and corruption. His police encounter death in Karachi amid accusations of state complicity deepened familial schisms and reinforced perceptions of the Bhuttos as a tragic dynasty ensnared in power struggles (Shaukat & Zahir, 2025). Thematically, this episode underscores dynastic politics' double bind: while family cohesion sustained the PPP's emotional appeal and voter loyalty in Sindh, intra-family rivalries and violent outcomes fragmented ideological coherence, shifting the party from revolutionary populism toward survivalist pragmatism and entrenching perceptions of feudal dominance.

Benazir Bhutto's assassination on December 27, 2007, during her campaign return from exile triggered a massive sympathy wave that propelled the PPP to victory in the 2008 elections, yet it marked a decisive shift toward pragmatism under Asif Ali Zardari's leadership. The attack amid threats from militants and establishment elements elevated Benazir to martyr status, galvanizing voters and securing the PPP's coalition government formation. Zardari, assuming co-chairmanship (later presidency from 2008–2013), navigated pragmatic alliances, including the 18th Amendment for provincial autonomy and reconciliation with rivals via the National Reconciliation Ordinance. This era prioritized coalition stability and economic stabilization over ideological purity, diluting the PPP's leftist roots in favor of centrist accommodation with military and opposition forces (Khan, 2021). Analytically strong, the transition illustrates populism's adaptive resilience: tragedy once again fueled electoral resurgence, but dynastic pragmatism under Zardari ensured short-term power retention at the cost of long-term national appeal, perpetuating the Bhutto legacy's cycle of mobilization, governance compromise, and institutional vulnerability in Pakistan's turbulent democracy.

Legacy, Decline, and Continuity

Asif Ali Zardari's presidency from 2008 to 2013 exemplified a pragmatic shift for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), marked by coalition politics and landmark constitutional reforms that strengthened federalism, yet overshadowed by persistent corruption scandals and a diminished national footprint. Ascending to the presidency amid the sympathy wave following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, Zardari navigated a fragile coalition with the PML-N (initially), ANP, MQM, and JUI-F to secure stability in a post-Musharraf era fraught with economic crises, militancy, and judicial activism. The crowning achievement was the 18th Amendment in 2010, which devolved significant powers to provinces, abolished the president's discretionary dissolution authority under Article 58(2)(b), and enhanced parliamentary sovereignty moves that fulfilled Benazir's reconciliation vision and curtailed military-backed interventions. However, governance was plagued by allegations of cronyism, misuse of public funds, and high-profile corruption cases involving Zardari and associates, which eroded public trust and fueled opposition narratives of maladministration. Analytically, this period highlighted the PPP's transition from ideological populism to survivalist pragmatism: coalition bargaining ensured the first full civilian term completion since 1977, yet patronage networks and economic mismanagement accelerated the party's retreat from national dominance to a Sindh-centric stronghold, reflecting broader challenges of institutionalizing power amid civil-military asymmetries (Khan, 2021; Ahmed, 2024).

Under Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's chairmanship since 2007 (formalized post-2015), the PPP has pursued revival efforts centered on youth engagement, Sindh consolidation, and progressive messaging, though these face sharp criticisms of entrenched dynastic politics and limited national traction. Bilawal, leveraging his Oxford education and modern persona, has emphasized youth leadership, climate resilience, and social welfare evident in campaigns highlighting Sindh's healthcare and education investments, public-private partnerships like Thar coal projects, and calls for generational change against "old-guard" politicians. His tenure has seen incremental electoral gains in provincial strongholds, with the party securing coalition roles in federal governments (2022-present) and maintaining governance in Sindh amid floods and economic pressures. Yet, critics decry the persistence of feudal, family-dominated structures that stifle internal democracy and alienate urban voters, portraying Bilawal as an inheritor rather than innovator bound by the Bhutto-Zardari legacy. Thematically, this era underscores populism's erosion: while Bilawal's appeals to youth and reconciliation offer continuity with Zulfikar and Benazir's mass mobilization, the party's regional confinement and reliance on dynastic charisma limit broader ideological revival in a landscape dominated by PTI's anti-elite narrative and military-influenced coalitions (Gohar, 2022).

Broader reflections on the PPP's contemporary trajectory reveal a profound erosion of its foundational populist roots, the military's enduring influence, the party's reduced national role, and the persistent "tragedy" motif that continues to define Pakistani politics. Once a vanguard of left-leaning redistribution and anti-establishment fervor, the PPP has morphed into a pragmatic, regionally anchored entity prioritizing coalition survival over transformative agendas, as seen in its post-2008 accommodation with military prerogatives and opposition rivals. The military's hybrid regime oversight manifest in electoral engineering, institutional manipulations, and periodic interventions has constrained civilian space, further weakening the PPP's ability to challenge praetorian dominance nationally while reinforcing Sindh's feudal-political patronage. This decline parallels a tragic continuity: from Zulfikar's execution

to Benazir's assassination and familial losses, the Bhutto saga embodies sacrifice amid power struggles, sustaining emotional loyalty in core bases but hindering programmatic renewal. Analytically, the PPP's evolution cautions against dynastic populism's limits in praetorian contexts charismatic legacies inspire resilience yet perpetuate elite capture, institutional fragility, and democratic backsliding, leaving the party as a diminished yet enduring force in a polarized landscape where military tutelage and emergent populisms overshadow progressive consolidation (Ali, 2025; Shahid & Rashid, 2025).

Conclusion

The Bhutto dynasty and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) encapsulate a profound paradox in Pakistani political history: a potent force of mass mobilization and democratic aspiration perpetually entangled with authoritarian impulses, dynastic hegemony, and cycles of devastating tragedy that have both sustained and constrained its legacy. From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's charismatic founding of the PPP in 1967, which ignited populist fervor through egalitarian slogans and structural reforms like the 1973 Constitution, to Benazir Bhutto's resilient leadership that shattered gender barriers while confronting military dominance, and onward to Asif Ali Zardari's pragmatic coalition-building and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's contemporary efforts at youth-oriented revival, the party has repeatedly challenged Pakistan's praetorian structures only to encounter violent reprisals executions, assassinations, exiles, and institutional marginalization. These tragedies, far from extinguishing the PPP, have mythologized the Bhuttos as symbols of sacrifice and resistance, preserving emotional loyalty in Sindh and among progressive constituencies even as the party's national influence has waned. Yet this resilience comes at a cost: the persistent personalization of power has eroded ideological roots, shifted focus from transformative populism to regional patronage and coalition pragmatism, and reinforced perceptions of feudal entrenchment amid broader democratic fragility. In Pakistan's hybrid political order, where military influence endures and emergent forces dominate discourse, the Bhutto-PPP saga serves as both an inspiring chronicle of progressive defiance against authoritarianism and a cautionary narrative of how charismatic leadership, when fused with dynastic succession and structural praetorianism, can perpetuate instability rather than forge enduring institutional democracy.

Ultimately, the enduring relevance of the Bhutto dynasty lies in its dual role as a beacon for inclusive politics and a mirror to Pakistan's unresolved contradictions. The PPP's foundational commitment to social justice, federal equity, and civilian supremacy evident in achievements like provincial autonomy via the 18th Amendment and ongoing advocacy for marginalized voices continues to offer a counter-narrative to elite capture and militarized governance. However, as the party navigates contemporary challenges under Bilawal's leadership, including coalition tensions, organizational revival in Punjab, and adaptation to a polarized landscape dominated by anti-establishment sentiments, its future hinges on transcending familial control toward genuine internal democratization and programmatic renewal. The "tragedy" motif that has defined the Bhuttos personal losses intertwined with political setbacks remains a poignant reminder that sustainable democracy demands more than heroic sacrifice; it requires robust institutions, accountable leadership, and inclusive coalitions capable of withstanding establishment pressures. In this light, the Bhutto legacy challenges Pakistan to reconcile populist energies with institutional maturity, ensuring that the aspirations of "Roti, Kapra, Makaan" evolve into a durable framework for equitable progress rather than recurring cycles of hope, power, and loss.

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