

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SHAPING PARTY IDEOLOGY
AND ELECTORAL MANIFESTOS IN PAKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE
ASSESSMENT, 2008–2023Ghulam Mustafa Noorani^{*1}, Muhammad Ilyas Khan²^{*1}PhD Scholar, Department Politics & IR, International Islamic University, Islamabad²MS Scholar, Department Politics & IR, International Islamic University, Islamabad¹ghulam.phdps51@iiu.edu.pk, ²mrmuhammadilyaskhan@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21902985>**Keywords**

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Corresponding Author: *

Ghulam Mustafa Noorani

Abstract

Political parties in Pakistan have historically operated through highly personalized leadership structures in which party ideology, electoral priorities, and manifesto commitments are often shaped by dominant leaders and political families. This study examines how political leadership influenced the ideological orientation and electoral manifestos of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) between 2008 and 2023. It adopts a qualitative comparative research design and conducts content analysis of the three parties' manifestos issued for the general elections of 2008, 2013, and 2018. The analysis focuses on principal leadership variables, including leaders' personal authority, political background, charismatic appeal, decision-making control, dynastic influence, populist communication, and responses to changing institutional and electoral conditions. The study is expected to argue that party ideology and manifesto formation in Pakistan are not determined solely by stable organizational principles; rather, they are substantially mediated by leadership personalities, strategic interests, and prevailing political circumstances. Nevertheless, the degree and form of leadership influence vary among the PPP, PML-N, and PTI because of their distinct organizational histories and support bases. This research is significant because it clarifies the relationship between leadership, party institutionalization, ideological development, and electoral policy commitments in Pakistan's contemporary democratic politics.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties are fundamental institutions of representative democracy. They represent different social interests, recruit political leaders, aggregate public demands, formulate policies, contest elections, and establish governments. By connecting citizens with state institutions, parties enable voters to participate in political decision-

making and hold governments accountable. Party ideology provides a relatively coherent set of political principles, while an electoral manifesto translates those principles into public policy priorities and commitments. Together, ideology and manifestos communicate a party's political identity, interpretation of national problems, and proposed program of government.

Nevertheless, parties do not always formulate their programs through participatory and institutionally established procedures. In weakly institutionalized party systems, authority may become concentrated around influential individuals, political families, or restricted leadership groups. Under such conditions, the preferences and strategic calculations of dominant leaders can exercise greater influence than party constitutions, deliberative forums, or ordinary members. Pakistan's major political parties have frequently been characterized by personalized authority, centralized decision-making, patronage networks, dynastic succession, and limited internal democracy. Leadership and candidate selection are commonly controlled from the top rather than determined through competitive internal elections (Ullah, 2020). Consequently, personalities and leadership groups remain particularly influential in shaping party organization, ideological positions, electoral strategies, and policy programs (Wu & Ali, 2020). Existing scholarship on Pakistani party politics has examined individual political parties, electoral performance, dynastic leadership, patronage, intra-party democracy, campaign strategies, manifesto promises, and the characteristics of prominent political leaders. These studies have made important contributions to understanding the organizational weaknesses and electoral behavior of Pakistan's parties. However, they generally treat party ideology, manifesto development, and political leadership as separate subjects. Insufficient attention has therefore been devoted to how leadership simultaneously influences a party's ideological identity and the policy commitments presented in its manifestos. Furthermore, few studies systematically compare the PPP, PML-N, and PTI across several electoral cycles. This limitation prevents a clear understanding of whether manifesto changes reflect ideological development, leadership succession, electoral competition, or short-term political calculation. The central research problem is therefore to determine how dominant leaders shaped the ideological orientations and manifesto commitments of Pakistan's three leading parties

during the politically significant period from 2008 to 2023.

This study addresses three interconnected gaps in the literature. First, there is limited longitudinal research comparing the PPP, PML-N, and PTI throughout the democratic period from 2008 to 2023. Most studies concentrate on one party, leader, or election and consequently overlook patterns of continuity and change across electoral cycles. Second, insufficient research connects leadership personalization with changes in party manifestos. This relationship requires investigation because centralized leaders may redefine policy priorities without corresponding changes in party institutions or membership preferences. Third, existing studies provide limited analysis of whether Pakistani manifestos express stable ideological principles or function principally as short-term electoral strategies designed to attract voters. Manifestos offer valuable evidence because they publicly translate party goals and ideological positions into specific policy commitments. Party change may involve modifications to organizational practices, political strategies, and issue positions in response to leadership decisions or external pressures (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Comparative manifesto analysis can therefore reveal the extent of leadership-driven change.

The principal objective of this research is to examine the influence of political leadership on the ideological orientations and electoral manifestos of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI between 2008 and 2023. More specifically, it seeks to identify the leadership characteristics and organizational mechanisms through which dominant leaders shaped party priorities. It compares the parties' 2008, 2013, and 2018 manifestos to identify ideological continuity, policy change, and strategic adaptation. The study also evaluates whether manifesto commitments resulted from established party principles, collective institutional deliberation, leadership preferences, or immediate electoral pressures. Finally, it assesses how leadership personalization affects party institutionalization and internal democracy in Pakistan.

The study is guided by five questions. First, how did political leadership influence the ideological identity of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI between 2008 and 2023? Second, how did leadership priorities shape the preparation and content of their 2008, 2013, and 2018 electoral manifestos? Third, what similarities and differences existed in the degree of leadership personalization across these parties? Fourth, did changes in manifesto commitments reflect stable ideological development or short-term electoral strategy? Finally, how did centralized leadership, dynastic authority, charismatic appeal, populist communication, and limited internal democracy affect party institutionalization and policy formulation during the period under examination in Pakistan?

This study contributes to scholarship on Pakistani party politics by connecting political leadership with ideological development and electoral communication. Its comparative and longitudinal approach demonstrates how leadership personalization can shape policy commitments, internal party democracy, and institutional development. The analysis also helps determine whether manifestos provide reliable expressions of party ideology or primarily represent leadership-led electoral strategies. Following this introduction, the paper reviews the relevant literature and develops its theoretical framework. It then explains the qualitative comparative methodology, analyses the manifestos and leadership patterns of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI, discusses the comparative findings, and concludes by presenting their broader democratic and institutional implications.

Literature Review

Political leadership refers to the capacity of political actors to establish collective objectives, construct a shared political identity, determine organizational priorities, interpret social demands, mobilize supporters, and respond to political crises. Leaders do not merely administer party organizations; they also define political problems and present particular policies, values, and narratives as appropriate solutions. Leadership is therefore essential to party

development because it connects organizational structures with supporters, electoral constituencies, state institutions, and broader social interests. Effective leaders may strengthen a party by communicating its program, maintaining internal unity, resolving factional disagreements, and adapting its strategy to changing political circumstances.

Weber's theory of authority is particularly useful for understanding leadership-centered parties. Charismatic authority rests on followers' belief in the exceptional personal qualities of a leader rather than on established rules or an impersonal organizational office (Weber, 1978). In such parties, political loyalty may become attached primarily to the leader, whose speeches, personality, family background, or symbolic appeal provides the organization with its public identity. Charismatic leadership can produce electoral energy, emotional attachment, and rapid mobilization, particularly during political crises. Nevertheless, excessive dependence on an individual may prevent the reutilization of authority and weaken institutional procedures.

Leadership-centered parties therefore present a significant organizational tension. A recognizable leader can unify competing factions and increase electoral support, but personal dominance may restrict consultation, collective policy development, and the emergence of alternative leaders. Leadership succession becomes especially difficult when the organization lacks an accepted mechanism for transferring authority. Political leadership should consequently be examined not only as an electoral resource but also as a factor shaping party organization, ideological direction, policy priorities, and long-term institutional development.

Party ideology can be defined as a relatively coherent body of beliefs through which a political party interprets the relationship between the state, society, and citizens. It normally includes positions on democracy, constitutionalism, economic organization, social justice, religion, national identity, governance, and foreign policy. Ideology provides a party with an interpretative framework: it identifies political problems, establishes normative objectives, and justifies

particular policy choices. It also helps supporters distinguish one party from another and creates continuity between a party's historical identity and its contemporary programme.

Ideology, however, should not be understood as completely fixed. Political parties operate within changing electoral, socioeconomic, and institutional environments. They may revise policy positions after electoral defeat, leadership succession, economic crisis, social transformation, institutional conflict, or the emergence of new competitors. Harmel and Janda (1994) argue that party change is frequently connected with external shocks and changes in party leadership or dominant organizational coalitions. Leaders may reinterpret established principles, introduce new issues, or reposition the party to reach additional constituencies. Ideological change can therefore be strategic, programmatic, or organizational.

A distinction must be made between ideological adaptation and ideological inconsistency. Adaptation occurs when a party revises its policies while retaining a recognizable set of foundational principles. For example, a party may update its economic policies without abandoning its broader commitment to welfare, constitutional democracy, or national sovereignty. Inconsistency arises when policy positions change opportunistically, contradict previous commitments, or depend largely on the immediate preferences of the dominant leader. The distinction requires longitudinal analysis because a single manifesto cannot establish whether change reflects coherent adaptation or short-term electoral calculation. Comparing successive manifestos can demonstrate whether ideological revisions are gradual, crisis-driven, leadership-directed, or inconsistent across electoral cycles.

An electoral manifesto is an official statement through which a party presents its understanding of national problems and its proposed program of government. Manifestos communicate policy commitments, differentiate parties from their competitors, mobilize voters, and provide standards through which citizens, journalists, and civil-society organizations may evaluate

subsequent governmental performance. They also transform broad ideological principles into more specific commitments concerning the economy, governance, welfare, national security, constitutional reform, religion, and foreign relations.

Manifestos must nevertheless be interpreted carefully. They represent authorized party claims at a particular electoral moment; they do not prove that the promised policies were implemented or that every party candidate actively promoted them. Their analytical value lies in revealing what the party formally chose to emphasize, omit, reinterpret, or promise. Comparison across elections can identify continuity, ideological repositioning, changing policy priorities, and the influence of leadership transitions.

Research on Pakistan's 2013 election indicates that parties treated manifestos as important campaign instruments and used them to communicate positions on economic, political, social, security, and foreign-policy issues. However, interviews with party representatives also suggested that manifesto awareness and systematic use varied at constituency level (Ahmed et al., 2018). Consequently, manifesto analysis should be combined with attention to leadership discourse and organizational practice.

Party institutionalization is the process through which a political party acquires organizational stability, internal legitimacy, autonomy, and durable social roots. Randall and Svåsand (2002) distinguish internal dimensions such as organizational reutilization and shared commitment from external dimensions involving autonomy and public recognition. An institutionalized party possesses stable decision-making procedures, recognizable ideological commitments, functioning local structures, accepted rules for candidate and leadership selection, and mechanisms through which authority can be transferred. Its survival does not depend entirely on one leader, family, or temporary electoral coalition.

Institutionalization does not require complete ideological rigidity or the absence of powerful leaders. Rather, it requires that leadership

operate through rules considered legitimate within the organization. Parties may adapt to new circumstances while preserving organizational memory, internal procedures, and a recognizable political identity. Leadership succession provides an especially important test: an institutionalized party should be capable of replacing its leader without organizational collapse or the complete abandonment of its program.

Personalization represents a contrasting tendency. It becomes strong when a leader dominates appointments, communications, candidate selection, policy formulation, and the interpretation of party ideology. The leader's image may gradually replace the party label as the primary object of electoral loyalty. Personalized control can improve message discipline and enable rapid decisions, but it may marginalize party councils, specialists, provincial organizations, and ordinary members. It can also produce ideological fluctuation when official commitments change according to the leader's strategic interests. Institutionalization and personalization should not be treated as absolute opposites; parties may contain formal institutions while remaining substantively leader-dominated. The central analytical question is whether organizational rules meaningfully constrain leadership authority.

Literature on Pakistan identifies personalization, dynastic succession, patron-client relations, influential political families, and dependence on "electable" as recurring features of party organization. These characteristics operate alongside provincial support bases, ideological traditions, and continuing civil-military imbalance. Political families often provide parties with recognizable names, financial resources, constituency networks, and established relationships with local intermediaries. Electable similarly contribute personal vote banks and patronage networks but may weaken programmatic coherence by moving between parties according to electoral opportunities.

Research describes Pakistan's party politics as highly personalized, with individual leaders and pressure groups frequently exercising greater influence than impersonal organizational

procedures (Wu & Ali, 2020). Formal intra-party elections have not necessarily produced genuine leadership competition. Ullah et al. (2020) find that the leadership of major parties is commonly determined through top-down nomination, while ordinary members remain excluded from crucial decisions. Studies of the PPP and PML-N likewise indicate substantial differences between formal party rules and actual practices of leadership and candidate selection (Subhan, 2020).

Personalization, however, does not mean that Pakistani parties lack all ideological identity. The PPP, PML-N, and PTI possess different historical narratives, social coalitions, regional strengths, leadership traditions, and policy reputations. Their ideologies are shaped through interaction among leaders, organizational interests, electoral competition, state institutions, and changing national crises. Leadership is therefore best examined as a powerful intervening force that selects, modifies, and communicates party commitments rather than as the sole source of ideology.

Literature Gap and Analytical Contribution

Existing research usually examines leadership personalization, party institutionalization, ideological change, or electoral manifestos separately. It also tends to concentrate on individual parties, particular elections, dynastic politics, or intra-party democracy. Insufficient comparative attention has been given to how leadership simultaneously influences ideological identity and manifesto construction across Pakistan's three leading parties over successive elections. This study addresses that gap by integrating four bodies of literature: leadership and personalization, party institutionalization, ideological change, and electoral-manifesto analysis. Through a comparative examination of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI between 2008 and 2023, it evaluates whether manifesto change reflects institutional deliberation, coherent ideological adaptation, electoral competition, or the preferences of dominant political leaders.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining party institutionalization, charismatic leadership, and party change theories. Party institutionalization serves as the principal framework, while charismatic leadership and party change theories explain how individual leaders and changing political conditions influence party ideology and electoral manifestos.

Party Institutionalization Theory

Party institutionalization refers to the process through which a political party develops stable procedures, recognizable values, organizational continuity, and an existence independent of particular leaders. Randall and Svåsand (2002) identify four interconnected dimensions of institutionalization: systemness, value infusion, decisional autonomy, and reification. Systemness concerns the regularity and coherence of internal structures, while value infusion occurs when members and supporters value the party beyond its immediate electoral usefulness. Decisional autonomy refers to the party's ability to formulate decisions without excessive control by external actors or dominant personalities. Reification means that the party becomes an established and enduring presence in public consciousness.

This framework is useful for comparing the PPP, PML-N, and PTI). Institutionalization will be assessed by examining whether party decisions follow stable procedures, leaders remain accountable to executive committees and other party bodies, and manifestos result from meaningful consultation. It will also investigate whether ideological commitments survive leadership transitions and whether parties possess organizational identities distinct from Benazir Bhutto and the wider Bhutto legacy, Nawaz Sharif, and Imran Khan. A party may have extensive membership and electoral support while remaining weakly institutionalized if authority is concentrated in one leader or family. Institutionalization is therefore treated as a multidimensional condition rather than a simple distinction between strong and weak parties (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

Charismatic and Personalized Leadership

Weber's theory of charismatic authority explains political obedience based on followers' belief in a leader's exceptional character, mission, or capabilities. Unlike legal-rational authority, which is attached to formal rules and offices, charismatic authority rests primarily on personal loyalty. Because charisma is associated with an individual, its continuation creates the problem of "routinization": personal authority must eventually be transferred into offices, procedures, traditions, or succession arrangements if the organization is to survive the leader (Weber, 1978).

This theory supports an examination of Benazir Bhutto's symbolic position and the continuing influence of the Bhutto name within the PPP, Nawaz Sharif's close identification with the PML-N, and Imran Khan's dominant role in PTI's organization and political narrative. Nevertheless, charismatic leadership is not inherently undemocratic. A recognizable leader may increase political participation, communicate policy choices, unify fragmented supporters, and mobilize citizens previously excluded from politics. The democratic implications depend on how personal authority interacts with party institutions. Leadership becomes problematic when internal disagreement is suppressed, candidate selection depends predominantly on personal loyalty, manifestos merely reproduce a leader's speeches, or succession becomes uncertain. Accordingly, this study distinguishes between charisma that strengthens collective mobilization and personalization that weakens institutional accountability. Evidence of routinization will include the delegation of authority, effective party committees, consultation in programme development, and continuity during leadership absence or transition.

Party Change Theory

Harmel and Janda's (1994) integrated theory explains why parties alter their strategies, organizational arrangements, objectives, and policy positions. Their central insight is that party change does not occur automatically or

continuously. Instead, significant change generally follows leadership turnover, a shift in the dominant internal faction, or an external shock that exposes a gap between existing party objectives and the political environment. The extent of adaptation also depends on a party's primary goal, such as winning elections, securing government office, promoting ideology, or protecting organizational survival (Harmel & Janda, 1994).

This theory enables manifesto changes between 2008 and 2023 to be interpreted as political responses rather than isolated textual differences. Electoral defeat may encourage a party to revise its economic program, campaign strategy, or position on governance. Governing experience can reveal the practical limitations of earlier promises, while movement between government and opposition may change the importance attached to accountability, institutional reform, or social welfare. Leadership turnover can similarly introduce different priorities or alter how established ideology is presented. External shocks—including terrorism, economic crises, civil-military conflict, judicial intervention, social protest, and competition from emerging parties—may also produce ideological or programmatic adjustment. The analysis will therefore determine whether observed changes represent genuine ideological transformation, tactical repositioning, or the replacement of collective party goals with the preferences of a dominant leader.

Conceptual Model and Variables

The independent variable is **political leadership**. It will be measured through the leader's control over party structures, candidate and officeholder selection, leadership succession, manifesto preparation, and the construction of leader-centred political narratives. Policy speeches, interviews, campaign addresses, and public statements will be compared with formal party documents to determine the leader's influence over policy priorities.

The dependent variables are party ideology and manifesto content. Ideological development will be evaluated through continuity in beliefs, changes in policy priorities, and consistency across successive electoral periods. Manifesto

content will be assessed through the specificity of promises, frequency of leader-centred language, relationship between speeches and written programmes, and consistency between electoral commitments and governing policies.

The relationship is mediated by several intervening variables: electoral competition, military influence, economic crises, terrorism and security conditions, judicial interventions, social movements, media transformation, and whether a party is governing or in opposition. These factors may either constrain leadership or enable leaders to centralize authority. The model consequently avoids attributing every ideological or manifesto change directly to individual agency. It proposes that leadership influence is strongest where party institutionalization is weak, while well-established procedures can translate individual leadership into collectively authorized policy. The comparative analysis will thus examine the interaction among leadership agency, organizational structures, and Pakistan's changing political environment.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how political leadership shaped the ideologies and electoral manifestos of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI between 2008 and 2023. These parties were selected because they constituted Pakistan's principal governing alternatives and represented different leadership, ideological, regional, and organizational patterns. Primary data include party manifestos, constitutions, leadership speeches, parliamentary statements, Election Commission records, policy documents, and press releases. PTI's analysis covers its 2013 and 2018 manifestos because it boycotted the 2008 election. Secondary sources include academic books, journal articles, PILDAT reports, election-observation reports, and reputable newspaper archives. Qualitative content analysis examines democracy, economy, welfare, federalism, accountability, religion, security, foreign policy, leadership, and governance. The analysis combines longitudinal comparisons within each party, thematic comparisons among parties, and comparisons

between leaders' speeches and manifesto commitments. Reliability is supported through consistent coding, transparent source selection, quotation verification, and acknowledgement of researcher bias, documentary limitations, and difficulties in establishing causation.

Political and Electoral Context, 2008–2023

Return to Civilian Government in 2008

Pakistan's 2008 general election marked the decline of the political order constructed under President Pervez Musharraf. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 profoundly affected the electoral environment and generated widespread sympathy for the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The PPP emerged as the largest parliamentary party and formed a coalition government under Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2008). Although coalition instability and continuing presidential influence complicated governance, the election restored representative civilian rule after nearly nine years of military-led government. Musharraf resigned as president in August 2008, and Asif Ali Zardari subsequently assumed the presidency. The Eighteenth Amendment of 2010 later strengthened parliamentary government by reducing presidential powers. Benazir Bhutto's death also produced an important leadership transition: Zardari became the PPP's principal decision-maker, while Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was appointed party chairperson and gradually developed a more active political role.

Electoral Transition of 2013

The 2013 election resulted in Pakistan's first transfer of authority from one elected civilian government to another through a general election. This transition represented an important milestone despite continuing weaknesses in electoral administration, security and political accountability. The PML-N, led by Nawaz Sharif, secured a parliamentary majority by emphasizing economic growth, infrastructure development, energy-sector reform and experienced leadership. Nawaz Sharif's personal authority remained central to the party's electoral

identity and policy direction. Meanwhile, PTI emerged as a major national challenger by criticizing corruption, dynastic politics and ineffective governance. Its campaign attracted substantial support among younger, urban and middle-class voters through public rallies, digital communication and a message of political change. Although observers identified procedural shortcomings, the election was broadly competitive and achieved an exceptionally significant democratic transfer (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2013).

The 2018 Election and PTI Government

The 2018 election transformed PTI from a powerful opposition movement into the principal governing party. Imran Khan placed anti-corruption at the center of PTI's campaign, portraying established parties as representatives of a corrupt political elite. The slogan of "Naya Pakistan" promised institutional reform, accountability, employment creation and an Islamic welfare state inspired by the idea of *Riyasat-e-Madina*. PTI's campaign was highly leadership-centred: Khan's personal image, public speeches and reputation as a political outsider frequently overshadowed the party's collective organization. PTI emerged as the largest party in the National Assembly and formed a coalition government. Nevertheless, the election remained controversial. Opposition parties alleged pre-election manipulation and institutional support for PTI, while observers documented restrictions affecting media freedom, candidate opportunities and the equality of the electoral environment. Although polling was generally orderly, counting and results-transmission problems weakened public confidence in the process (EU EOM, 2018).

Political Developments, 2018–2023

Between 2018 and 2022, the PTI government attempted to combine anti-corruption measures, welfare programmes and economic reform. Initiatives such as the Ehsaas Programme reflected its welfare-state commitments, but inflation, fiscal pressures, external debt and administrative difficulties limited its

performance. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified economic and public-health challenges, requiring the government to balance restrictions with the protection of livelihoods. Political relations became increasingly confrontational as opposition parties accused the government of selective accountability and authoritarian practices. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), formed in 2020, united several opposition parties against the PTI administration. In April 2022, Imran Khan became Pakistan's first prime minister removed through a successful parliamentary vote of no confidence. Shehbaz Sharif subsequently headed a multi-party coalition government (Khan et al., 2025). The episode demonstrated the constitutional importance of parliamentary confidence, although the preceding attempt to prevent the vote produced a serious constitutional controversy (Library of Congress, 2022).

After his removal, Khan adopted a more confrontational populist narrative and demanded immediate elections. PTI's relations with military, judicial and administrative institutions deteriorated sharply. Khan's arrest in May 2023 and the ensuing violent protests deepened polarization and provoked legal and organizational pressure against PTI. By 2023, ideological distinctions among the major parties were increasingly combined with short-term electoral strategy, leader-centred mobilization and competing claims to democratic legitimacy.

Comparative Party Case Studies

Pakistan Peoples Party

Historical and Ideological Foundations

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was established in 1967 under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as a populist and democratic-socialist party. Its foundational slogan—"Islam is our faith, democracy is our polity, socialism is our economy, and all power to the people"—combined religious identity with representative government and socioeconomic redistribution. The party appealed particularly to workers, peasants, students, and disadvantaged communities through its commitment to *roti, kapra aur makan*—food, clothing, and shelter.

Although Bhutto's government introduced nationalization and labour reforms, the PPP's socialism was neither doctrinally Marxist nor hostile to religion; rather, it connected Islamic egalitarianism with social justice and state-led development. Federalism, parliamentary democracy, civilian supremacy, and provincial participation also became important components of the party's identity. However, its ideology remained closely connected to the Bhutto family. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's execution and Benazir Bhutto's assassination reinforced a political legacy based on sacrifice, democratic resistance, and emotional identification with the party leadership (Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians [PPPP], 2008; Shafqat, 2016).

Leadership Transformation

Benazir Bhutto reinterpreted the PPP's traditional populism for a post-Cold War political environment. While retaining the language of social justice and civilian democracy, she moderated its socialist economics by accepting privatization, market mechanisms, and engagement with Western governments and international financial institutions. Her leadership emphasized the restoration of democracy, women's political participation, moderation, and opposition to military rule. Consequently, the PPP gradually moved from nationalization-oriented socialism toward centre-left social democracy.

After Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December 2007, leadership passed to Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, with Asif Ali Zardari exercising effective control as co-chairperson. Zardari transformed the party's immediate political strategy through coalition-building and his "politics of reconciliation." His pragmatic leadership facilitated cooperation with former opponents and helped the PPP-led government complete its parliamentary term. Nevertheless, critics associated this period with weakened organization, patronage, and the party's declining electoral presence outside Sindh.

Bilawal subsequently attempted to revitalize the party through progressive language concerning human rights, pluralism, women, minorities,

young people, and climate justice. However, this did not fully restore its former national support. Leadership succession therefore preserved the PPP's democratic and Bhutto-centered identity while transforming its economic programme into pragmatic centrism and concentrating its effective electoral organization increasingly in Sindh (Mufti et al., 2020; Wu & Ali, 2020).

PPP Manifestos, 2008–2018

The PPP's 2008 manifesto was heavily shaped by Benazir Bhutto's assassination and the transition from military-led government. It presented democracy as both a constitutional objective and a means of achieving socioeconomic security. The document promised parliamentary supremacy, an independent judiciary, provincial autonomy, stronger democratic institutions, employment creation, education, healthcare, and protection for women, workers, minorities, and vulnerable citizens. Its foreign-policy position favoured peaceful regional relations, opposition to extremism, and engagement with the international community while protecting national sovereignty (PPPP, 2008).

Many constitutional commitments acquired greater institutional substance during the PPP-led government. Most importantly, the Eighteenth Amendment restored the parliamentary character of the Constitution, reduced presidential powers, removed the president's authority to dissolve the National Assembly, and transferred important responsibilities to the provinces. The 2013 manifesto consequently presented constitutional reform, consensus politics, and the completion of an elected government's term as major achievements. It also highlighted the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), established in 2008 to provide cash assistance to low-income households, especially women. The program reflected the PPP's shift from large-scale state ownership toward targeted social protection (PPPP, 2013).

The 2018 manifesto retained this emphasis but expanded its rights-based and developmental language. It promised to strengthen Parliament, protect the Eighteenth Amendment, expand BISP, reduce poverty, create employment,

improve public healthcare and education, and strengthen labor and agricultural protections. Women's economic empowerment, minority equality and youth participation received greater attention. Economically, the party supported a mixed model involving private investment, progressive taxation, public regulation and welfare expenditure rather than a return to Bhutto-era nationalization. Its foreign-policy program stressed parliamentary oversight, regional peace, economic diplomacy and improved relations with neighboring states (PPPP, 2018).

Across the three manifestos, democratic federalism and social protection exhibited considerable continuity. Nevertheless, implementation remained uneven, particularly regarding employment, public-service reform and institutional accountability. The overall movement was from broad socialist transformation toward constitutional reform, targeted welfare programmes, regulated markets and inclusive development.

Leadership Influence and Ideological Consistency

Leadership has supplied the main source of ideological continuity within the PPP. Bhutto symbolism connects successive programs to social justice, popular sovereignty and resistance to authoritarianism. Images and memories of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto allow the party to present contemporary policies as part of an enduring democratic struggle. However, this reliance on inherited symbolism has also limited internal institutionalization and made ideology highly dependent on the Bhutto-Zardari family.

Zardari's reconciliation strategy translated democratic principles into coalition management and constitutional bargaining. The Eighteenth Amendment represented its most significant institutional outcome, although political pragmatism also weakened the party's oppositional and socialist identity. Bilawal has attempted to strengthen its progressive profile through the vocabulary of constitutional rights, gender equality, religious pluralism and youth inclusion. Nonetheless, the party continues to

accommodate influential landowning and patronage-based groups, particularly in Sindh.

The PPP therefore demonstrates both ideological consistency and significant adaptation. Democracy, federalism, welfare and Bhutto symbolism remained stable, but the instruments used to pursue them changed. Leadership succession moved the party from left-populist economic intervention toward pragmatic centrism and targeted social protection. Its manifestos preserved recognizable principles, but leadership calculations increasingly determined how these principles were interpreted and prioritized.

Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz

Ideological and Organizational Foundations

The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) emerged from the conservative Muslim League tradition and acquired its distinct identity under Nawaz Sharif during the late 1980s and 1990s. Initially supported by sections of the military establishment as a counterweight to the PPP, it combined social conservatism with economic liberalization, privatization, business-friendly regulation and infrastructure-led development. Its support was concentrated primarily among Punjab's traders, industrialists, urban middle classes and established rural political networks. The party's constitutional outlook emphasized governmental stability, economic order and parliamentary institutions rather than transformative social reform. Over time, however, repeated confrontations between Nawaz Sharif and military leaders altered this orientation. His removal in 1999, exile under Pervez Musharraf and later disqualification strengthened the party's advocacy of civilian authority and electoral legitimacy. Consequently, the PML-N gradually combined economic conservatism with a more explicit civilian-supremacy and parliamentary-constitutional narrative, although its organization remained centralized around the Sharif family (Mufti et al., 2020; PML-N, 2013).

Nawaz Sharif and Leadership Personalization

Nawaz Sharif has exercised decisive influence over the PML-N's political identity, candidate

selection, alliances and ideological direction. The party's name itself institutionalizes his leadership, while electoral campaigns have frequently presented him as the principal source of political legitimacy and economic competence. His development narrative emphasizes motorways, electricity generation, industrial growth and large infrastructure projects as visible evidence of effective government.

The Sharif family's influence has nevertheless produced differentiated leadership styles. Shahbaz Sharif cultivated an administrative image based on rapid implementation, centralized monitoring and infrastructure delivery during his tenure as Punjab's chief minister. His approach is generally more managerial, pragmatic and accommodating toward state institutions. Maryam Nawaz, in contrast, became prominent through her defense of Nawaz Sharif after his 2017 disqualification. Her language of *vote ko izzat do*—respect the vote—connected the family's political grievances with the broader principle of civilian and electoral supremacy.

These leadership roles have assisted organizational survival during repression, disqualification and electoral defeat. However, they have also restricted meaningful internal competition and succession outside the family. The PML-N thus illustrates a recurring tension: concentrated family leadership provides recognizable identity and organizational cohesion, but simultaneously prevents the development of autonomous party institutions and collective policymaking (Wu & Ali, 2020).

PML-N Manifestos, 2008–2018

The PML-N's 2008 program reflected both its established economic priorities and Pakistan's transition from Musharraf's rule. It supported parliamentary government, restoration of the judiciary, implementation of the Charter of Democracy, limits on arbitrary executive authority and stronger constitutional institutions. Economically, it advocated investment, privatization, fiscal discipline, employment generation and support for industry and agriculture. Education, healthcare, local government and energy security were included,

but economic revival remained the central organizing principle.

The 2013 manifesto developed this approach into a comprehensive program for economic recovery. It promised higher growth, increased investment, tax reform, privatization of inefficient state-owned enterprises, employment creation and improved trade. Responding to severe electricity shortages, it prioritized additional power generation, changes in the energy mix, reduced circular debt and reform of distribution companies. Large infrastructure projects, including roads, transport systems and economic corridors, were presented as instruments of national integration and private-sector expansion. The document also promised educational reform, improved healthcare, local-government elections, counterterrorism measures, police reform and stronger parliamentary oversight (PML-N, 2013). However, the scale of its commitments raised questions about implementation and financing (Burki, 2013).

The 2018 manifesto relied more strongly on the party's governmental record. It highlighted improvements in electricity generation, infrastructure, economic growth and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as evidence of administrative competence. Future commitments included export promotion, digital development, agricultural modernization, housing, employment, education and expanded health services. The program continued supporting market-led development but also included welfare measures, subsidies, social protection and greater opportunities for women and young people (PML-N, 2018).

Political and institutional reform became more visible across these manifestos. The party supported parliamentary authority, judicial reform, accountable local government and constitutional continuity. Nevertheless, its position on civil-military relations was often expressed indirectly because of institutional sensitivities. Overall, the three documents reveal strong continuity in economic liberalization, energy production and infrastructure development, alongside an increasingly

pronounced commitment to electoral legitimacy and parliamentary government.

Leadership and Ideological Development

The PML-N evolved substantially between 2008 and 2018, although this change was driven more by leadership experience than formal ideological deliberation. It originated as an establishment-supported conservative party, but Nawaz Sharif's conflicts with military governments progressively encouraged an electoral-constitutional identity. The demand for civilian supremacy became particularly pronounced after his 2017 removal, when the party framed respect for the popular mandate as essential to democratic government. Its economic philosophy remained broadly centre-right. Private investment, deregulation, infrastructure, industrial expansion and market-led growth continued to dominate its manifestos. However, electoral competition and governing experience encouraged limited welfare commitments, including health insurance, educational assistance, youth schemes, income support and subsidies. These policies supplemented rather than replaced its growth-first economic approach.

The party also attempted to move beyond its Punjab-centered origins through CPEC, national infrastructure and regionally distributed development projects. Yet its strongest organization and symbolic achievements remained associated with Punjab. Leadership personalization was crucial to both ideological development and its limitations: Nawaz supplied the civilian-supremacy narrative, Shahbaz represented administrative delivery, and Maryam connected dynastic succession with electoral resistance. Accordingly, the PML-N became more nationally ambitious and constitutionally assertive, but did not become fully institutionalized. Its ideological evolution remained inseparable from the political experiences and strategic interests of the Sharif family.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf**Origins and Ideological Identity**

PTI was established by Imran Khan in 1996 as a movement for political change based on justice, humanity, and self-respect. Its original ideological identity combined opposition to corruption with demands for accountability, rule of law, and institutional reform. PTI argued that Pakistan's difficulties resulted primarily from corrupt leadership, weak institutions, and the domination of politics by traditional elites. Economically and socially, the party advocated welfare-state principles inspired by Islamic social justice, including equal citizenship, poverty reduction, and public investment in education and healthcare. Its emphasis on national sovereignty appeared particularly in its opposition to foreign political interference, drone strikes, and Pakistan's dependence on external financial assistance. PTI consequently presented itself as an alternative to both the Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz. Its programme promised not merely a change of government but the moral and institutional reconstruction of the state through transparent government, merit, accountability, and citizen-centred development (Wu & Ali, 2020).

Imran Khan's Leadership

Imran Khan's charismatic authority became the central source of PTI's political identity and electoral appeal. His reputation as a former cricket captain, philanthropist, and founder of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital allowed him to present himself as patriotic, personally honest, and independent of established political families. Consequently, supporters increasingly identified PTI with Khan himself rather than with its constitution, organization, or collective leadership. His speeches transformed corruption into a moral conflict between an honest people and a self-interested ruling elite.

Khan mobilized urban middle-class voters, young people, women, and overseas Pakistanis through mass rallies and intensive social-media campaigning. Digital platforms enabled PTI to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, circulate

Khan's speeches, organize supporters, and popularize the language of *tabdeeli* political change (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). Nevertheless, charismatic mobilization was accompanied by centralized decision-making. Khan exercised considerable influence over party appointments, electoral strategy, policy priorities, and the distribution of tickets. Before the 2018 election, PTI recruited numerous "electable" from established political families to improve its chances in constituency-based contests. Although electorally effective, this strategy contradicted its anti-elite rhetoric and produced tensions between long-serving ideological workers and recently recruited conventional politicians. Thus, Khan expanded PTI nationally while simultaneously limiting the development of autonomous party institutions.

PTI Manifestos, 2008–2018

A direct three-election comparison requires qualification because PTI boycotted the 2008 general election and therefore did not contest it through a comparable national electoral manifesto. The boycott reflected Khan's opposition to the political and constitutional arrangements associated with President Pervez Musharraf. PTI's program during this period nevertheless emphasized an independent judiciary, restoration of constitutional government, sovereign foreign policy, and accountability of political elites.

The 2013 manifesto converted these broad demands into a detailed programme for "Naya Pakistan." It promised an independent and impartial accountability system, institutional transparency, tax reform, economic self-reliance, and an end to politically motivated appointments. Economic transformation was connected with energy reform, employment creation, agricultural development, investment, and expansion of the tax base. Human-development commitments included increased expenditure on education and healthcare, protection for disadvantaged citizens, and the construction of a welfare-oriented state. PTI also supported empowered local governments, DE politicization of the police, civil-service reform,

and greater provincial responsibility for public services. In foreign policy, it advocated national independence, regional peace, negotiated conflict resolution, and reduced dependence on foreign assistance (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf [PTI], 2013).

The 2018 manifesto, titled *Road to Naya Pakistan*, retained these commitments but presented them as more administratively achievable after PTI's five-year government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It referred to provincial experience in police, education, healthcare, environmental protection, and local-government reform as evidence of PTI's governing capability. The manifesto more explicitly defined its objective as an Islamic welfare state founded upon justice, equality, compassion, and the rule of law. It promised job creation, affordable housing, poverty reduction, institutional autonomy, agricultural modernization, and improved social services (PTI, 2018).

The accompanying One Hundred Days Agenda translated the manifesto into six immediate priorities: transforming governance, strengthening the federation, revitalizing economic growth, developing agriculture and conserving water, revolutionizing social services, and protecting national security (Dawn, 2018). Therefore, ideological continuity existed between 2013 and 2018, but the later program was more policy-oriented, electorally ambitious, and focused on demonstrating readiness for national government.

Leadership and Ideological Consistency

Imran Khan remained the principal interpreter of PTI ideology. Ideas such as accountability, national dignity, Islamic welfare, and Naya Pakistan acquired political significance largely through his speeches and personal image. This leadership produced considerable ideological consistency: opposition to corruption, emphasis on justice, welfare commitments, and institutional reform remained central from PTI's establishment through the 2018 election. Khan's ability to simplify these principles into an emotionally compelling struggle between "the people" and a corrupt status quo helped

transform PTI from a marginal party into a national governing alternative.

However, electoral pragmatism weakened the coherence of this reformist project. Recruitment of electables, alliance-building, and dependence on experienced politicians reproduced practices PTI had condemned. Its transition from protest to government also required compromise with bureaucratic, parliamentary, coalition, and economic constraints. Scholars therefore describe PTI as both an important change in Pakistan's party competition and a movement that remained affected by established patronage-based politics (Wu & Ali, 2020).

PTI consequently illustrates a tension between populist leadership and party institutionalization. Khan's charisma mobilized new voters and provided ideological unity, but excessive personal identification made the organization dependent upon his authority. Candidate selection and strategic decisions remained centralized, while internal institutions struggled to become independent of the leader. PTI's experience suggests that charismatic leadership can initiate rapid political change, yet durable ideological implementation requires collective decision-making, stable organizational procedures, and institutional capacity beyond the personality of the founding leader.

Comparative Manifesto Analysis

Leadership Models

The three parties demonstrate distinct but highly personalized leadership models. The PPP follows a dynastic and symbolic model rooted in the Bhutto family. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's populist politics and Benazir Bhutto's democratic struggle remain central to its identity. After Benazir's assassination, Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari preserved this symbolic continuity, although decision-making remained concentrated within the family. The PML-N combines familial control with a comparatively developed organizational and electoral structure. Nawaz Sharif provides its principal political identity, while Shehbaz Sharif represents an administrative and performance-oriented leadership style. Its manifestos connect the Sharif family with

economic competence, infrastructure and development. PTI presents the strongest charismatic-personalist model. Its identity is closely linked to Imran Khan's image as an honest, anti-establishment and transformative leader. Khan mobilized young and urban voters

through anti-corruption and anti-status quo rhetoric, making his personal credibility central to PTI's electoral appeal (Murtaza, 2016; Wu & Ali, 2020).

Party	Dominant leadership model	Principal source of identity
PPP	Dynastic and symbolic	Bhutto legacy and social democracy
PML-N	Familial and organizational	Sharif leadership and development
PTI	Charismatic and personalist	Imran Khan and political change

Thus, leadership remains indispensable to all three parties, although its form varies from inherited symbolism to administrative performance and charismatic mobilization.

Ideological Continuity and Change

PPP's ideological trajectory reflects movement from the socialist populism of the 1970s toward welfare-oriented centrism. Its manifestos retained the language of equality, labour protection and popular empowerment but increasingly emphasized regulated markets, private investment and targeted social protection. Programmes such as the Benazir Income Support Programme allowed the party to preserve its pro-poor identity without advocating extensive economic nationalization (Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians [PPPP], 2008, 2013, 2018).

PML-N consistently promoted market-oriented growth, privatization, infrastructure, energy production and business development. Nevertheless, its ideology expanded beyond economic conservatism after prolonged conflict with military governments. Its 2013 and 2018 manifestos gave greater prominence to parliamentary democracy, constitutional supremacy and civilian authority. Development and constitutional politics therefore became mutually reinforcing components of its identity (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, 2013, 2018).

PTI combined anti-corruption, nationalism, welfare commitments and institutional reform. Its programme linked accountability with police reform, independent institutions, local government and economic revival. By 2018, the

concept of *Naya Pakistan* had incorporated an Islamic welfare state, human development and national sovereignty. Ideological continuity existed in its demand for justice, but its recruitment of traditional electables demonstrated growing electoral pragmatism (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, 2013, 2018).

Comparative Policy Priorities

Economic policy reveals both ideological difference and practical convergence. PPP favoured state-supported welfare, employment generation, agricultural development and redistributive social protection. PML-N prioritized private investment, trade, energy, roads, industrialization and large infrastructure projects. PTI proposed investment-led growth but linked it to tax reform, anti-corruption, institutional efficiency and human-capital development. All three nevertheless accepted a mixed economy and recognized the private sector as an important source of growth.

Regarding welfare, PPP possessed the clearest continuity through income support and pro-poor programmes. PML-N combined welfare schemes with the expectation that infrastructure and economic expansion would generate employment. PTI presented education, health, housing and poverty reduction as elements of an Islamic welfare state. Each party promised increased investment in education and healthcare, although funding and implementation mechanisms were often insufficiently specified (Burki, 2013).

PPP was the strongest advocate of federalism and provincial autonomy, particularly through its support for the Eighteenth Amendment. PTI placed greater emphasis on empowered local governments, while PML-N accepted devolution but remained comparatively centralized in practice. All three endorsed women's participation and minority rights, but these commitments were rarely central to their electoral narratives.

PTI made accountability its defining issue, whereas PPP and PML-N framed it within parliamentary and constitutional processes. PPP and PML-N more explicitly emphasized civilian supremacy after their experiences under military governments. PTI advocated institutional balance and national sovereignty, although its civil-military position was less consistently articulated. Foreign-policy differences were mainly rhetorical: all supported relations with China, regional peace, Kashmir, counterterrorism and strategic independence. Thus, national security, economic stability and welfare produced considerable policy convergence despite contrasting ideological language (PPPP, 2018; PML-N, 2018; PTI, 2018).

Leadership Language in Manifestos

Leadership language indicates different degrees of personalization. PPP manifestos repeatedly employ Bhutto names, quotations, photographs and symbols of sacrifice. References to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto connect current promises with an inherited democratic and populist mission. PML-N documents similarly highlight Nawaz Sharif's vision and the developmental achievements associated with the Sharif governments. However, their detailed sectoral programmes sometimes produce more party-centred and administrative language.

PTI's discourse is especially dependent on Imran Khan's personal promise of change. The 2018 manifesto presented *Naya Pakistan* as the realization of a political project closely identified with his leadership. Across the parties, images, slogans and accounts of leaders' achievements help personalize otherwise technical policy documents. Opponents are constructed differently: PPP emphasizes anti-democratic

forces, PML-N contrasts development with instability, and PTI portrays established parties as corrupt defenders of the status quo. Manifestos consequently serve both as policy programmes and instruments for legitimizing dominant leaders.

Manifesto Promises and Governing Performance

Selected governing outcomes show that leadership narratives influenced implementation but did not guarantee complete manifesto fulfillment. PPP translated its welfare identity into the Benazir Income Support Program and connected its federalist commitments to the Eighteenth Amendment. Nevertheless, energy shortages and weak economic performance limited its broader promises.

PML-N's 2013–2018 government prioritized electricity generation, highways, transport and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, reflecting Nawaz Sharif's development-centred narrative. Progress in infrastructure was more evident than structural reform of taxation, local government or public institutions. PTI similarly implemented priorities consistent with Imran Khan's welfare narrative through Ehsaas, health-insurance initiatives and housing programs. However, ambitious commitments concerning accountability, police reform, administrative restructuring and employment were only partially realized. Manifestos thus influenced the selection and branding of flagship programs, while fiscal constraints, institutional resistance, political conflict and leadership preferences determined which promises received sustained attention.

Comparative Findings

The three parties maintained recognizable identities: PPP emphasized the Bhutto legacy, welfare and federalism; PML-N promoted development and constitutional government; and PTI centred on accountability, reform and Imran Khan's promise of change. Nevertheless, their programmes converged on economic growth, social protection, education, security and foreign-policy independence. Leadership enabled ideological adaptation to changing electoral

conditions, but personalization also weakened collective decision-making and succession mechanisms. Governing experience moderated ambitious ideological claims as parties encountered fiscal pressures, institutional constraints and electoral compromises. Manifestos therefore represented neither meaningless rhetoric nor binding programmes; they were selective frameworks through which leaders connected party traditions, electoral strategy and governing priorities.

Discussion

Leadership as a Source of Ideological Direction

The comparative analysis demonstrates that political leaders are central interpreters of party ideology in Pakistan. Rather than merely inheriting fixed traditions, leaders selectively reinterpret them according to contemporary political conditions. PPP leaders connected the Bhutto legacy with democracy, social protection, and provincial autonomy, while gradually moderating the party's socialist orientation. Nawaz Sharif associated PML-N with economic development, infrastructure, constitutional government, and civilian authority. Imran Khan defined PTI through anti-corruption, accountability, national sovereignty, institutional reform, and the idea of an Islamic welfare state. Leaders also determine which national problems receive electoral attention and which policies occupy prominent positions in manifestos. Through speeches, slogans, symbols, and campaign narratives, they translate complex programmes into recognizable political messages. "Roti, kapra aur makaan," development-oriented governance, and "Naya Pakistan" illustrate how leadership connects policy promises with emotionally meaningful symbols. Leadership therefore provides ideological direction by organizing diverse commitments into coherent and electorally communicable narratives.

Leadership Personalization and Institutional Weakness

Dependence on prominent leaders has simultaneously weakened the institutional development of Pakistan's major parties.

Decision-making within PPP, PML-N, and PTI has generally remained concentrated around dominant leaders, their families, or trusted advisers, limiting meaningful internal debate and collective policy formulation. Dynastic succession provided continuity in PPP and PML-N but restricted leadership competition, while PTI's identification with Imran Khan created uncertainty regarding succession beyond its founding leader. Such personalization encouraged ideological flexibility because policies could be revised according to electoral calculations without extensive consultation with party members. It also contributed to differences between opposition rhetoric and governmental conduct. Parties advocating parliamentary accountability, institutional reform, or civilian supremacy sometimes adopted more centralized and pragmatic positions after attaining power. This reflects weak party institutionalization, in which personal authority frequently outweighs formal rules and autonomous organizational structures (Panebianco, 1988). Consequently, manifestos may express ambitious principles without establishing effective internal mechanisms for ensuring leadership accountability, implementation, or ideological consistency.

Leadership as an Instrument of Mobilization

Leadership personalization should not be viewed exclusively as an institutional weakness. Recognizable leaders can mobilize politically inactive citizens, simplify complex policy debates, and unite fragmented party organizations. Benazir Bhutto mobilized democratic resistance and represented civilian constitutionalism, Nawaz Sharif connected electoral politics with development and civilian authority, and Imran Khan attracted urban voters, young people, women, and overseas Pakistanis through anti-status quo campaigning. Strong leaders can also introduce neglected issues, including social protection, corruption, institutional reform, and provincial rights. During political crises, personalized authority may help parties defend elections, parliamentary government, constitutional continuity, and civilian rule against

non-democratic intervention and institutional fragmentation.

External Constraints on Manifesto Development

Leadership alone, however, cannot explain ideological change or manifesto development. Pakistan's parties operate within an environment shaped by military influence, judicial intervention, coalition bargaining, provincial interests, terrorism, economic instability, and intense electoral competition. Civil-military relations have constrained party positions on national security and foreign policy, while judicial decisions have influenced leadership continuity and constitutional narratives. Coalition governments require compromises that may dilute manifesto promises, particularly when parties depend upon regional allies. Economic crises, fiscal deficits, inflation, and negotiations with international financial institutions also restrict governments' ability to implement welfare and development commitments. Terrorism has compelled parties to balance security policies, civil liberties, and regional concerns, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Media coverage and digital campaigning further encourage simplified, leader-centred narratives. Provincial electoral interests likewise shape PPP's emphasis on federalism, PML-N's development strategy, and PTI's reform agenda. Manifestos therefore emerge from interactions among leadership preferences, institutional constraints, socioeconomic pressures, and competitive political circumstances.

Theoretical Implications

The findings support Weber's (1978) argument that charismatic authority generates loyalty through confidence in an individual leader rather than impersonal institutions. However, the cases also demonstrate that charismatic, dynastic, and familial authority can coexist with electoral organization and ideological adaptation. Weak institutionalization increases personalism by allowing leaders to control candidate selection, policy priorities, and manifesto interpretation. At the same time, party adaptation remains

necessary because leaders respond to electoral defeat, social change, and political crises (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Leadership consequently strengthens mobilization but may weaken democratic accountability when internal procedures, succession rules, and implementation mechanisms remain subordinate to personalized authority.

Conclusion

This study concludes that political leadership substantially shaped the ideological identity and manifesto priorities of Pakistan's three parties between 2008 and 2023, although this influence varied. In the PPP, leadership operated mainly through dynastic continuity, with successive leaders interpreting the Bhutto legacy through commitments to democracy, federalism, social protection, and populist politics. In the PML-N, the Sharif family combined centralized party control with an ideology centred on economic development, infrastructure, market-oriented growth, and, increasingly, constitutional supremacy. PTI displayed the strongest dependence on an individual leader. Imran Khan's charismatic authority defined its anti-corruption, anti-status quo, nationalist, welfare, and institutional-reform narratives, making his personal image almost inseparable from the party's identity.

Across all three parties, leaders selected national problems, framed electoral narratives, and determined which manifesto commitments received political prominence. Leadership also enabled ideological adaptation, organizational unity, and electoral mobilization during changing circumstances. Nevertheless, excessive personalization weakened internal deliberation, succession planning, policy continuity, and accountability. Manifestos often reflected immediate electoral strategies and leaders' priorities rather than sustained institutional research. Therefore, leadership was both a constructive force and an institutional constraint: it made party ideologies recognizable and electorally effective, but frequently prevented their transformation into coherent, participatory, and durable policy programs.

Recommendations

Pakistan's political parties should institutionalize manifesto development by establishing permanent committees that operate between elections. These bodies should consult provincial and local party organizations so that programs reflect regional diversity and grassroots priorities. Policy experts, universities, workers' representatives, civil-society organizations, and communities should participate in drafting and reviewing proposals. Parties should strengthen genuine intra-party elections, decentralize decision-making, and create transparent leadership-succession procedures to reduce dependence on families or charismatic individuals. Ideological principles should be clearly documented and distinguished from the personal preferences of leaders. Parties should also publish progress reports explaining which manifesto promises have been fulfilled, delayed, modified, or abandoned. Greater representation of women, young people, minorities, workers, and marginalized regions should be ensured in policy and leadership forums. Finally, every party should maintain a digital archive containing manifestos, constitutions, policy papers, speeches, implementation reports, and revisions, enabling citizens and researchers to evaluate ideological continuity, policy development, and democratic accountability over time.

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