

# Religious populism in Pakistani Punjab: How Khadim Rizvi's Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan emerged

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## Abstract

Khadim Rizvi's open manifestation of religion helped him become one of the most popular leaders of Barelvi-Sunni Muslims in Pakistani Punjab. He emerged as the leader of a moral community during a crisis. After a series of protests and negotiated agreements with the federal and provincial governments, he was able to translate his support into electoral power. In the 2018 election, his TLP bagged 1.8 million votes (National Assembly seats) from Punjab. It was the first instance in recent political history when a newcomer religious party finished third in the province. No religious party had been able, in the last three elections (2008, 2013, 2018), to impact elections in Punjab as the TLP did in 2018.

## Keywords

Religious populism, politicisation, Barelvi, election, Punjab

## Introduction

In Pakistani Punjab all major cities and highways were blocked on a few hours' notice from Khadim Rizvi. His Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) devotees took to the streets on the call of their leader. They led an organised streak of blockades of all roads connecting Multan and Rawalpindi. Even with no time for preparation, their arrangements were adequate. They could hold on for weeks without changing their strategy. Their commitment to the cause and leader was firm; they would kill and be killed for the cause (Tarakzai, 2018). It was evident that only a few thousand of them

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could cripple state affairs and day-to-day life in the country's largest province with virtually no resistance.

It was 8 November 2017 – the beginning of a country-wide protest (though mainly focused on Punjab) that was first of its kind in decades. (This protest was adequate to remind the Barelvi-Sunnis (hereafter, Barelvi) and their leadership of their power, influence and commitment.) The November protest not only highlighted the growing reach of TLP or the ability of a religious movement to organise the masses and pressure the state; it also showed the rise of a (populist) religiopolitical movement whose ascent was unparalleled in the recent electoral history of Punjab. The rise of TLP was rapid. Its ascent surprised most observers, as did its brand of politics (Tarakzai, 2018).

TLP, founded and led by Khadim Rizvi, capitalised on Barelvi interpretation of Islam – compared with the global trends of nationalism, culture and race (Mudde, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Following the 2017 protest, several interpretations sought to explain its ascent (Yusuf, 2018). Owing to Pakistan's political history, one of the most accepted versions underscored the support from Pakistan's powerful establishment (Shah, 2019a, 2019b). But this choice of convenience spares little space for explaining popular sentiments, circumstances, incremental successes and strategies of the TLP leadership. Rarely did any study focus on Khadim Rizvi's rhetoric, which helped him attract the arguably under-represented Barelvis in Punjab. His brand of religious populism, emphasising a sub-sect, augmented the support and helped TLP attract 1.8 million votes (thus making it the third-largest party) in the province in the 2018 election. In this study, we explore the question: 'how did TLP become the third-largest party in Punjab in its first election?'

This study proceeds in four sections. The first section includes the concept of religious populism, a part of the broader idea of populism, and situates TLP in the first dimension that involves the open manifestation of religion. The following section traces the genesis of the party and its charismatic leader, and describes how he translated street power into electoral power. The third section comprises the election data of Punjab (National Assembly (NA) seats) and emphasises TLP's impact on the election results. The data helps compare the standing of religious parties in the 2018 election. Also, a comparison of 2013 and 2018 elections regarding the performance of major religious parties is made to underline the backdrop in which TLP emerged. The last section explains the case of TLP's religious populism.

A limitation facing this study is the lack of academic work on TLP. Therefore, it focuses on newspaper reports, media commentaries, speeches and interviews of the TLP leadership (available on YouTube) and personal interviews with the party leaders and contestants.<sup>1</sup>

## **Religious populism: Idea, dimensions and pillars**

Religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity for populist parties (Roy, 2016). The pervasive role of religion in populism has convinced scholars to classify religious populism as a type of populism. Zúquete (2017) divides religious populism into two dimensions: open and subtle religious manifestations. Open manifestation involves politicisation of religion, whereas the latter is tied to sacralisation of politics in modern societies. The first category is openly religious in a sense that its understanding is shaped by religion understood in a narrow sense of a relationship with a divine sphere.

Several studies on religious populist groups, professing a divine interpretation of human reality, interpret them through the lens of politicisation of religion. The interpretations of the relationship with a transcendent force or being are narrow. They refer to how religion serves to legitimise a social order, a regime or a political community against destructive, evil forces. In religious populism, this means that scriptural religion is used to sanctify a specific cause. Populists obey the

commands of holy scriptures that they profess and preach are divine. They refer to sacred texts and their dictates, especially in conflict against elites and others, to justify their statements, actions and objectives.

On the other hand, the second dimension, involving the subtle manifestation of religion, is tied to a functional understanding that involves sacralisation of politics. It is expressed through a relationship with the sacred. Politics acquires a transcendent nature in this dimension. Hence it is no longer a mundane affair and is viewed as the tool for change – anchored in myths, rites and symbols. The sacralisation of politics stimulates group solidarity and provides meaning to the existence and density of communities. Thus, populists find it useful to appeal to the people through religious arguments, images, metaphors and parables (de la Torre, 2015). They may also use common, popular, culturally specific and religious vocabulary to distinguish themselves from polished, politically correct ways of doing politics (Ostiguy, 2017).

In addition to the dimensions, some other factors also impact the progress of populist groups and movements. Their impact reflects from the intensity, fervour, and the level of radicalisation (de la Torre and Arnson, 2013; Roberts, 2013). An important consideration in this regard is the context. Societies with strong institutional settings and party system may limit the populist challenge to the status quo, but societies with weak institutions and disarrayed parties only facilitate it. Institutions and the party system thus play a significant part. Cultural and religious factors do the rest; they play a crucial role in mobilising populist movements. Cultural character facilitates the spread of the religious populist message and augments its reception. Together, the above factors shape the bond among the pillars of populist politics.

The three pillars of religious populism are charismatic leadership, a moral community and a mission of salvation. Zúquete (2017) associates six images to a religious populist leader. First, the leader is a man ahead of his times: his commitment and audacity to expose lies is praised. Second, he is an exemplary figure, and his personal qualities and life achievements are important. Third, he sacrifices for the cause and his affiliation is resilient. Fourth, he is the people; he is the personification of the people he represents. (Religious populist movements therefore try to portray their leaders' character as the opposite of those of self-serving elites.) Fifth, he is the saviour who is on the mission to save the community. Sixth, because virtually everything is attributed to him, the leader is the party. Political parties, which populist leaders found, serve as the link. They facilitate personal attachment between leaders and followers.

On the other hand, the followers of religious populist leaders perceive themselves attached to the narrative of 'chosenness'. In their struggle against evil, they are joined by brothers: attachment to the same attributes transforms the followers into a moral community. The character and nature of the mission of the community elevate it into a sacred entity and separate it from corruption and evil in the surroundings. In this backdrop, historical figures serve as the icons of the essence of such communities. The community members experience nonmaterial values and strong bonds of brotherhood, idealism and righteousness. These elements help create a sense of collectiveness among them. Only as a collective entity can the community members work for salvation and ultimate success.

However, their success also depends on the context. For instance, religious populists in Asia and Europe differ in their emphasis and practices. In today's West, populists' use of religion is much more about 'belonging' than 'belief', and revolves around two main notions: restoration and battle (SSRC, 2016). For right-wing populists in Western democracies, others (second only to the elite) are immigrants and Muslims who they believe intend to impose their values. (They frequently criticise the church for its welcoming, accommodating attitude towards others.) Populists in Muslim-majority societies are comparatively more associated with religion (Hadiz, 2016). Their ideas may be confined to borders of nation-states, but most of them also emphasise the notion of ummah against malignant elites and conspiring enemies.

Religious populists in Islamic states call for the establishment of a 'state based on Islamic law' and elimination of socio-political order that is unequal, immoral and un-Islamic (Hadiz, 2016).

One such case in the Islamic world is Pakistan's TLP that challenged the status quo and demanded the establishment of a state based on Islamic laws where the Prophet's religion would guide every aspect of the lives of community members. TLP's case falls in the first dimension of religious populism. Its three pillars were connected by religious, sectarian factors. As a case of 'belief', it pursued a religious populist agenda in Punjab.

Although the role of religion had been important in provincial politics of Punjab, TLP renewed the drive, based on its narrow interpretation, to Islamise society. TLP's politicisation of religion might not be unexpected, but its rise as a political actor in the 2018 election was.

## **The genesis of TLP**

TLP evolved from the killing of then-Governor Punjab Salman Taseer on 4 January 2011, at the hands of his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri cited Taseer's interpretation of blasphemy laws as his stimulus. Following the assassination, his stance became a rallying point that attracted thousands of supporters as defendants of the sanctity of prophethood. (The support base came mainly from the Barelvi sub-sect.) When the court handed him the death sentence (October 2011) for assassinating the governor, his supporters took to the streets to save him. They believed that he had done a service to Islam (Khan, 2011). One of the most prominent among his supporters was Khadim Rizvi, a wheelchair-confined former Imam Masjid (prayer leader).

Born in 1966 in Attock district, Khadim Rizvi is a staunch follower of Ahmed Raza Barelvi. At the time of Salman Taseer's assassination, he was serving in the Punjab Auqaf Department and delivering Friday sermons at Pir Makki Masjid, Lahore. After the assassination, he ignored the warning notices (from the Punjab government) and continued to preach his views on the blasphemy law (295-C of Pakistan Penal Code [PPC]). Relieved of his duties eventually, he travelled throughout the country to organise support for the release of Mumtaz Qadri (Ali, 2017). However, his efforts could not influence the court or the government.

After the court's verdict, Khadim Rizvi discreetly used the sensitivity associated with sanctity of the Prophethood and blasphemy laws in Pakistan (Frontline Club, 2020). He referred to selective examples from Islamic history as validation of his parochial interpretation of Islam, politics and the state structure. His appeal among Barelvis and emphasis on the finality of Prophet Muhammad (Khatm-i-Nabuwwat) helped him spread the message and engender loyalty among Qadri's supporters – who were mainly Barelvis. Dozens of lawyers, retired judges, public servants, pirs and sajjada nasheens (custodians of shrines) announced their support for the Rizvi-led save-Qadri movement. Influential entrants also enhanced his support. But this growing support could not pressure the Supreme Court of Pakistan, whose verdict decided against Qadri (who was hanged on 29 February 2016). Thousands thronged the roads and streets of Rawalpindi to attend his funeral.

Mumtaz Qadri's execution did not end the momentum of the save-Qadri movement. Khadim Rizvi (who had founded TLP in 2015) translated the sentiments into support for Qadri's mission that, he claimed, was upholding the sanctity of prophethood. However, glorifying his gallantry and sanctifying his grave, where hundreds visited for spiritual blessings, were not adequate to keep the momentum intact. In October 2017, TLP got its much-needed chance when the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz, PML-N)-led government passed the Election Act 2017 – in which an amendment proposed a change from 'I solemnly swear' to 'I believe' in the finality of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood. The party leadership immediately declared that the act was a deliberate effort of the government to change the Khatm-e-nabuwwat oath (DAWN, 2017).

It accused the government and the National Assembly members (MNAs), who did not oppose the amendment immediately, of appeasing ‘Ahmadis’ (a minority sect, non-Muslim under Pakistan’s constitution, 1974) and other non-Muslims, including the ‘international lobbies working against Muslims’. The amendment was interpreted as a part of a conspiracy to undermine the sanctity of prophethood (Munawer, 2017). It was a cause worth fighting for.<sup>2</sup> TLP thronged the streets to protest against the ‘robbery of the collective honour’ vested in the finality of the prophethood.<sup>3</sup> Its devotees led an organised streak of blockades, beginning on 8 November 2017, of virtually all main highways in Punjab, and crippled state affairs and day-to-day life in the province.

The November siege underlined Khadim Rizvi’s appeal and his potential street power across the province. His devotees blockaded major cities and highways on only a few hours’ notice for more than 48 hours. They gallantly confronted the police after the government’s botched attempt to clear a sit-in site at Faizabad (Rawalpindi–Islamabad interchange) through using force. They left their position only when the government and TLP signed an agreement under the protection of the Pakistan Army (The News 2017a, 2017b).<sup>4</sup> The November 27 agreement left the government in a weak position: the government had to reverse the amendment and accept the resignation of its Law Minister Zahid Hamid to appease the critics. However, the agreement also emboldened TLP. In January 2018, the party leadership announced another sit-in in Lahore. The Punjab government, also led by PML-N, acquiesced to TLP’s demands without any defiance.

However, the above (two) agreements were not without lessons and indications. It was evident that the more the government acquiesced to pressure, the more the TLP leadership demanded. (It transpired that the TLP leadership were looking for more than protests and tactical victories. They did not want the pressure-group tag (Geo News, 2018). In effect, by January 2018, Khadim Rizvi and the core TLP members had started showing their interest in electoral politics.) For instance, after the announcement of a caricature competition in the Netherlands in August 2018, Khadim Rizvi pressured the government to disengage with the Dutch state at all levels. His call for another march to Islamabad put the government in a difficult situation. However, before Islamabad could take any action, the competition was cancelled by the Dutch prime minister (Hashim, 2018b; Rizvi Media, 2018).

In August 2018, when the Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) government appointed an Ahmadi (Princeton University) Professor Atif Mian to the prime minister’s economic advisory council, Khadim Rizvi threatened the government with blockades and country-wide protests. Following its predecessor, the PTI government also acquiesced. Thus, after the events of August–September 2018, TLP’s abilities to blockade cities, threaten governments, and Islamise its narrative to attract the masses were evident. By mid-2018, all developments were encouraging for TLP. They increased the support of TLP and the confidence of its leadership. Therefore, unsurprisingly, TLP used similar tactics after the acquittal of Asia Bibi (a Christian woman on death row who was accused of blasphemy) by the Supreme Court on 31 October 2018 (Khattak, 2018). On the following day, TLP workers and supporters blockaded all major cities and highways in Punjab.

During the protest, an orthodox TLP leader Pir Afzal Qadri encouraged devotees, supporters and sympathisers to act. He directed them to act against state institutions – most importantly, the executive, judiciary and Army – and raise the flag of jihad against the decision-making elite (My Videos, 2018). Again, the government avoided using force and tried to negotiate with the TLP leadership. After negotiations, the government agreed to some of TLP’s demands. It agreed to put Asia Bibi on the exit control list until the conclusion of a review petition.

## From streets to ballots

TLP’s 2018 election slogans deen ko takht par laana hai (we will bring religion into power) and vote ki izat nizam-e-Mustafa mein ha (honour of vote is in Prophet Muhammad’s system) were new entries in Punjab’s electoral politics (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, 2018; Faruqi, 2018; Nizam e

Mustafa, 2018). These slogans were a rallying point that provided TLP with leverage to become a party that could revive the attraction of religion and sect in electoral politics. Its electoral slogans were different from those of other parties; they were catchy, rhythmic and attractive. It emphasised the religious aspect and ultimately attached religious slogans to Pakistan's foreign policy, defence policy, and social and political issues. The politicisation of religion was evident. The election campaign further underlined the religious populist credentials of Khadim Rizvi and his TLP.

For instance, the TLP leadership presumed that people could speak with one, uniform voice for the establishment of Prophet Muhammad's system to ensure justice and equality. For that, electoral politics was the key. TLP favoured representation, but like other populists its rhetoric showed disdain for institutions. The events of October–November 2018 affirmed the disdain. During a speech, Pir Afzal encouraged the top brass of the military to depose Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa. He othered the general from 'Muslim generals'. He encouraged the guards and drivers of judges to kill them in the name of Islam, and he called Prime Minister Imran Khan a Yahoodi bacha (Jew boy) and a pawn of the Jewish lobby (Dajjal, 2018).

Another populist aspect of TLP politics was Khadim Rizvi's anti-pluralism and anti-elitism. He also blamed the leaders of other Sunni sects of sectarianism. He mocked the members of Tablighi Jamaat (Society of Preachers) for their life and travelling style, and undermined them as an organisation obsessed with lotay and bistray (water vessel and bedding). As for anti-elitism, he frequently used abusive language against the political and religious elite of the country: Sharifs, Bhuttos, Khan, and Tahir-ul-Qadri (Hafiz Hamza, 2016; Sahibzada Tanveer, 2019). Sajjada nasheens (custodians of shrines), sahabzadas (heirs) and mutwallis (trustees) were also on his target list (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, 2019b). He referred to Pakistan's political and religious elite as thugs, corrupt and conspirators. In his address at Allama Iqbal's mausoleum, he criticised the state elite, including then-Chief Justice of Pakistan Anwar Zaheer Jamali, for their inabilities and anti-Pakistan, anti-Islam attitude (Rizvi Media, 2016).

His interpretation of the amendment and the political elite's role in subverting the khatam-nabuwwat act pitched him against the political and religious elite in assemblies. (A Deobandi religious party Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (Fazal ur Rehman, JUI-F) was in alliance with PML-N.) He directed his audience to stay away from PML-N and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), as the latter were agents of the infidel lobbies which were working to undermine the sanctity of prophethood. TLP's Farooq ul Hasan warned that when you enter the polling booth, do not forget that Imran Khan, Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif (leaders representing election symbols of bat, arrow and tiger) are not seeing you, but Prophet Muhammad is seeing you. Allah is seeing you and angels on the shoulders are seeing you. Only those who vote for Allah and His Prophet would qualify for salvation in this world and the one after-life (Labaik Ki Power, 2018).

There was no ambiguity regarding the objective, strategy and target audience. The latter was the key to TLP's election campaign. Although attracting a maximum number of people was important, the target base was Barelvis. As members of the moral community (the third pillar of religious populism), only Barelvis were 'the people' (in populist sense) because only they fulfilled the criteria. (Khadim Rizvi's imagined state had to be a Barelvi-Sunni Muslim state where laws had to be per Sunni jurisprudence.)

In TLP's interpretation, Barelvis constituted 'the people'. As TLP changed its priorities, as populist movements do (Müller, 2016), and moved from agitation to electoral politics, 'the people' continued to participate in gatherings, rallies and blockades. According to TLP, 'cowards' could not come out of fear, but true lovers of the Prophet came out without any concern about consequences. Every time the people came out, they spoke with one, uniform voice. They wanted the implementation of nizam-e-Mustafai (Prophet Muhammad's system). No referendum was needed to know about their preferences. Their slogan – Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (I am here, Oh Prophet) – affirmed what they wanted. The people of Pakistan needed what the country was made for: Islam.

In this way, Khadim Rizvi campaigned on maintaining Pakistan's Islamic identity. The land of pure (Pakistan) was meant to be a place for the pure. All those who had any problem with the state structure were told to leave the country, because Pakistan was a state made in the name of Islam (NZ TV, 2020). Muslims of the subcontinent and their leadership did not sacrifice for intermixing with Hindus of India and non-Muslims of the West. His rhetoric was based on instances from the history of the pre-partition subcontinent. He stated that he had not asked people to do something different because Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah did the same. Jinnah was not a liberal (LSF, 2017). He had also used religion in politics.<sup>5</sup>

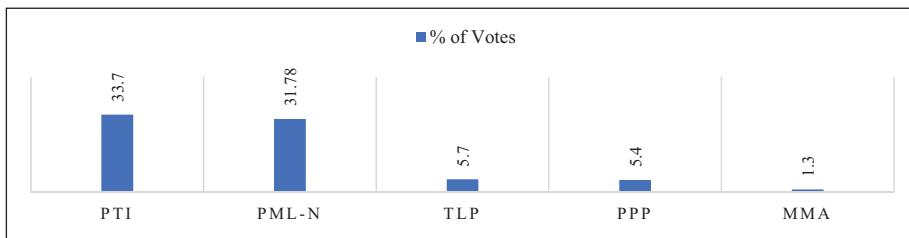
Interestingly, Khadim Rizvi and most of his associates and allies did not refute Pakistani nationalism, nor did they challenge the long-propagated inextricable bond of Islam and ideology of Pakistan (Jalal, 2014). His view endorsed that of the state and establishment. On several occasions, he showed complete conformity to the state's position on Kashmir and Jihad, and endorsed the state's list of enemies. He declared that Kashmir would become Pakistan. On several occasions, he challenged the Indian generals and talked about going to the India–Pakistan border. He charged that American influence had harmed the country. The US, and the West in general, wanted to weaken Muslims and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Against the West, he resorted to Pakistan's national poet Allama Iqbal's works. However, according to Rizvi, 'Iqbal's courage and bravery [for religion] were required to understand Iqbal'. The 'interpretation of Iqbal given by agents of Jews and Christians' was misleading (Rizvi Media, 2016).

Following Iqbal's message, for TLP, every shade of social, political, economic and religious life mattered only after Allah and His Prophet. In 1929, Iqbal had praised the act of Ghazi Ilmuddin (a devotee who killed a Hindu book publisher for committing blasphemy and was hanged in 1929). According to Khadim Rizvi, TLP followed Iqbal's feats. Because Iqbal praised Ilmuddin, the TLP leadership lauded the acts of Amir Cheema (a devotee who attempted to kill the editor of *Die Welt* for reprinting Prophet Muhammad's cartoons in 2006 and was found dead in his cell) and Mumtaz Qadri (Islamic Hadees, 2018).

In Punjab's context, arguably the most important aspect of Khadim Rizvi's politics was his position on the sanctity of prophethood and blasphemy law. Thus, soon after his rise in the save-Qadri movement, blasphemy became a major issue in the province. His position on the sanctity of prophethood and blasphemy law is a key to explain his ascent as the leader of Barelvis. It was his narrative on the above matters that helped him achieve in years what other religious leaders could not in decades. His message attracted tens of thousands of Barelvis – who had been, despite their majority, eclipsed by Deobandis in electoral politics. His method was simple. His style suited the less-educated, under-developed faction of the society. He spoke mostly in Punjabi. Because stories and tales attract, he narrated stories glorifying Islam's golden age. Tales of Sahabas' (Prophet's companions and followers) bravery and dedication helped him keep the audience captivated (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, 2020).

He told that Sahabas waged wars, shed blood, and sacrificed everything for the Prophet's sanctity. Love for the Prophet (ishq-e-Rasool) and bravery were their hallmarks. In his case, it was the love for the Prophet that influenced his decision to resign from his job as Imam at Pir Makki Masjid (Lahore) and lead the save-Qadri movement. He stated that the same force had enabled a disabled old man to stand up against the reign of tyranny to follow the path of Sahabas and saints. Some of his actions justified his claims. For instance, during the November 2017 protests and subsequent police operation, he did not leave the sit-in site. Police raids, arrests and killings of TLP members did not soften his position either. Nor did, as he told, the offers involving money and a possibility of a share in Pakistan's National Assembly change his position (DAWN, 2018).

The 2018 election offered the first opportunity to Khadim Rizvi to translate his appeal into electoral strength in Punjab. His narrative helped him attract a significant number of voters in the



**Figure 1.** Political Parties Vote Bank in Punjab: 2018 National Elections.

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan, Party Wise Vote Bank, 2018.

province. Although TLP did not win a single seat, it finished third in the province and bagged more votes than PPP and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).<sup>7</sup>

### Translating street power into electoral power

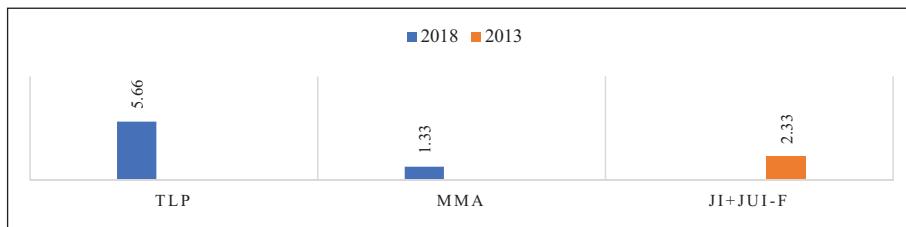
TLP's rise as a political contender in Punjab was largely calculated. Following the November 2017 and January 2018 agreements, Khadim Rizvi and some other prominent TLP members did not hide their aims for the political, electoral sphere. The party's post-agreement activities showed that it had emerged as a political force with aims and slogans. Its leadership was also hopeful about electoral success. Although most of the election observers in Pakistan did not predict its success (in terms of numbers of seats) in Punjab's electoral politics given the electoral history and voting patterns in the province, they predicted its presence and potential impact on election results.

In the 2018 election, TLP's politicisation of religion and charismatic leadership provided the required momentum. The election results in Punjab (NA seats) confirm it. TLP bagged approximately 5.66 percent of the polled votes for the NA seats (Government of Pakistan, 2018a). After the 2002 election, TLP's voting percentage was the highest among religious parties contesting NA elections in Punjab. Conversely, MMA got only 1.33 percent of the polled votes. Given their vast experience of electoral politics and organised party structures, MMA members did not fare well in the election because most of the member parties had contested the last three NA elections (2008, 2013, 2018) in Punjab. Similarly, PPP, despite its relatively stable vote bank (Jones, 2003), could take only 5.4 percent (approximately a hundred thousand less than TLP) of the polled votes (Government of Pakistan, 2018b).

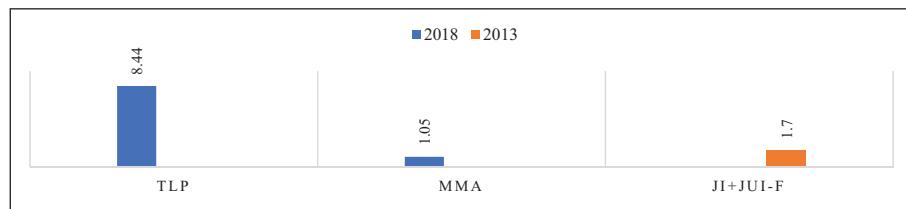
The Figure 1 provides the voting percentage of the top five political parties in Punjab (Government of Pakistan, 2010).

Election data from the last three elections (2008, 2013, 2018) shows that religious parties never had a chance to form government in Punjab or the centre. Even in the 2002 election, when MMA formed government in the North-Western Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, KPK), the party was not among the top four in Punjab. In the 2008 election, when Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) boycotted elections, MMA, contesting without JI, got less than one percent (0.78%) of the polled votes in Punjab (Government of Pakistan, 2010). In the 2013 election, MMA was dissolved and the member parties contested elections individually. The total share of both JI and JUI-F, the two largest parties in terms of votes and presence, was 2.33 percent of the polled votes (Government of Pakistan, 2014). In the 2018 election, five religious parties gathered under the banner of MMA. However, they got only 1.33 percent of the polled votes in Punjab (Figure 2).

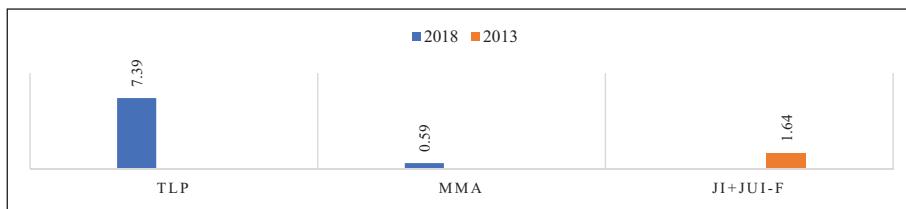
Figures 3–11 provide a comparison of TLP's 2018 performance with religious parties' performance in the last two NA elections (2013, 2018) in Punjab. Each figure compares the parties' position in a division. Punjab is divided into nine divisions.



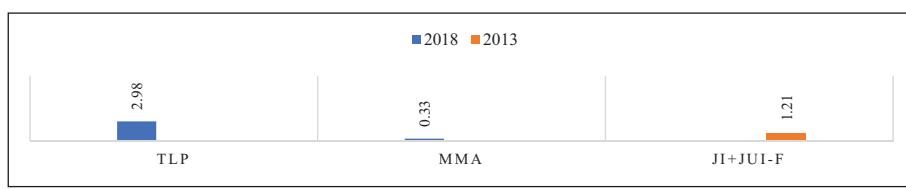
**Figure 2.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Punjab Province.



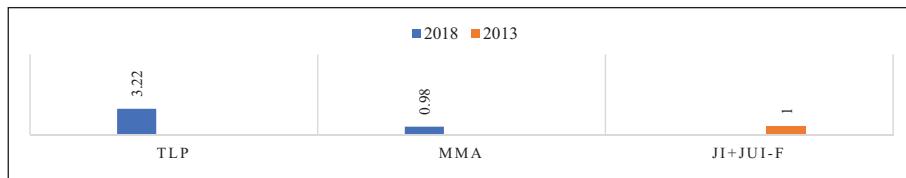
**Figure 3.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Rawalpindi Division.



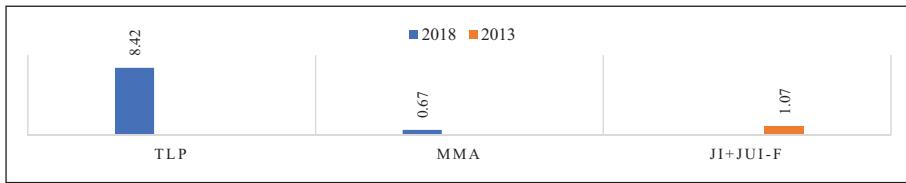
**Figure 4.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Gujranwala Division.



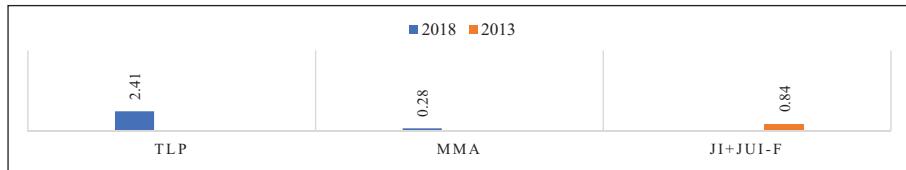
**Figure 5.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Faisalabad Division.



**Figure 6.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Sargodha Division.



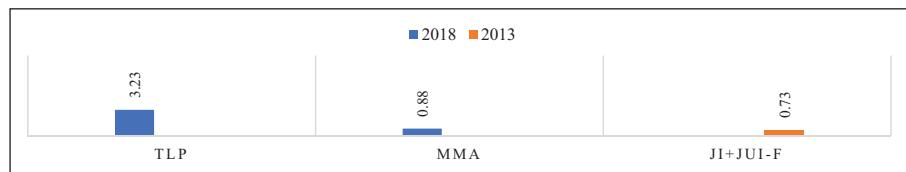
**Figure 7.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Lahore Division.



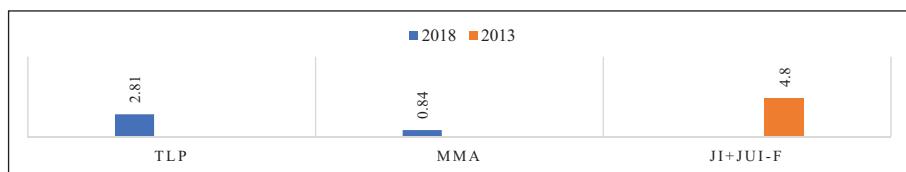
**Figure 8.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Sahiwal Division.



**Figure 9.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Multan Division.



**Figure 10.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Bahawalpur Division.



**Figure 11.** 2018 & 2013 National Elections: Dera Ghazi Khan Division.

The 2018 election data (Table 1) shows that unlike MMA, TLP was in a position to impact the election results and work as a vote-divider on at least 20 NA seats in Punjab.<sup>8</sup> This study keeps the number to 20 because in approximately 20 cases, TLP candidates' votes were about twice the

**Table I.** TLP's Impact on the 2018 Election Results.

	Constituency	Difference of Votes (between winner and runner-up)	TLP Votes	Winner's Affiliation	Runner-up's Affiliation
1	NA-57	11,786	27,618	PTI	PML-N
2	NA-66	19,444	29,556	PTI	PML-N
3	NA-71	7078	29,698	PML-N	PTI
4	NA-73	1406	9958	PML-N	PTI
5	NA-74	3382	34,372	PML-N	PTI
6	NA-87	8300	44,159	PTI	PML-N
7	NA-98	4628	6613	PTI	Independent
8	NA-100	840	6683	PML-N	PTI
9	NA-102	12,690	16,135	PTI	PML-N
10	NA-105	8651	15,237	PTI	Independent
11	NA-106	2531	9986	PML-N	PTI
12	NA-108	1211	8075	PTI	PML-N
13	NA-110	6043	10,782	PTI	PML-N
14	NA-114	538	3919	PTI	PML-N
15	NA-117	2883	19,584	PML-N	Independent
16	NA-118	2523	49,419	PTI	PML-N
17	NA-119	16302	21,513	PTI	PML-N
18	NA-120	2,5436	35,487	PML-N	PTI
19	NA-122	31251	34,648	PML-N	PTI
20	NA-126	3124	16,371	PTI	PML-N
21	NA-129	8026	12,900	PML-N	PTI
22	NA-133	12406	13,235	PML-N	PTI
23	NA-139	8123	15,613	PML-N	PTI
24	NA-140	249	15,503	PTI	PML-N
25	NA-151	1529	8987	PML-N	PTI
26	NA-159	3277	6034	PTI	PML-N
27	NA-163	13,367	15,491	PML-N	PTI
28	NA-166	9094	18,109	Independent	PTI
29	NA-172	4392	9184	PML	PML-N
30	NA-182	2476	6620	PPP	JD
31	NA-183	14,998	35,174	PPP	Independent
32	NA-187	5933	7455	PTI	Independent
33	NA-190	129	6352	Independent	PTI

difference between the winner and runner-up. Overall, in 33 NA seats, its candidates bagged more votes the difference between the winner and runner-up.

### **TLP's religious populism contextualised**

Khadim Rizvi represented virtually all characteristics (images) of religious populism. His version of populism was closer to the first dimension. The open manifestation of religion was evident in the rhetoric of Khadim Rizvi and prominent TLP members. Rizvi's version of politics emphasised Islam as the source of guidance in all matters, ranging from politics to economy to social issues.

Some observers may question the position of TLP as a special case and contend that other reliopolitical parties operating in Pakistan, such as JI and JUI-F, also emphasise Islam as their source of guidance and the mode of life. Or a similar question may arise concerning other sectarian parties – such as Pakistan Sunni Tehreek, Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek, and Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen – which, like TLP, follow a strict sectarian line and define ‘the people’ on a sectarian basis. Others may suggest that the presence of religious and sectarian parties in Punjab merely represents right-wing Islamism, and TLP’s ascent should be seen within this trend.

What made TLP exclusive in the politics of Punjab is its leader’s version of religious populism. Khadim Rizvi’s exclusive emphasis on Islam not only as the source of guidance but also the panacea distinguished him (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, 2019a). He emerged as a one-agenda leader: the agenda was the save-Qadri movement that later transformed into upholding the sanctity of prophethood. His preferences changed, but his method did not. He had no (traditional) political, social or economic vision to share with people. For him, the Barelvi-Sunni interpretation of Islam offered solutions to all problems of Pakistanis and Muslims in general. There was little other than Islam and Islamisation he could offer for worldly benefits.

TLP differed from religious parties which tried to attract people with selective opportunities in businesses and jobs. Unlike candidates of other parties, TLP candidates contested elections with almost no organised election campaigns and setup. In Pakistani Punjab, where voters prefer candidates to parties and choose individual benefit over that of society (Sabat and Shoaib, 2019), TLP’s election strategy and campaign at first appeared misguided. For the voters were not asked for their votes (as happens in the province where candidates and their workers and supporters assure voters of every favour they ask for), nor were they given high hopes regarding individual and societal socio-economic benefits. TLP candidates did not promise roads, pavements, hospitals, schools, universities, grounds or industrial zones. The only promise they made was the implementation of the ‘Prophet’s system’ and following him in every sphere of life. They told their audience that the Prophet’s way was the path to success.

TLP’s politicisation of religion (Islam) was also different from most of the religious parties in the Muslim-majority states. Studies on religious parties in Turkey, Morocco and Indonesia (Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia) highlight economic, social and political reasons that underpinned their rise and sustenance (Ali-Fauzi, 2018; Hadiz, 2011, 2014; Kirdiş and Drhimeur, 2016). Some observers portray religious populism as an available alternative. Contrary to the religious parties in Turkey, Morocco and Indonesia, TLP did not have a lasting presence in Punjab. Also, its leadership was not politically active before the 2018 election. Virtually no one from the core leadership came from political, influential families. Although the religious parties in Indonesia and Turkey emphasised Islam, they tried to avoid sectarian controversies. However, the TLP leadership did not hesitate from criticising the leaders of other sects and religious, political parties, even though it was evident that such a political course would affect their election performance.

In Punjab, TLP had to compete against established religious parties. Some parties such as JI had been contesting elections and influencing the politics of the province for decades. With an established vote bank, JI was not slow in allotting party tickets and organising its workers. But TLP had to start from scratch. In this regard, Khadim Rizvi’s charismatic leadership helped the party overcome some of its weaknesses. He emerged as an exemplary figure whose commitment and audacity could not be questioned. As a man of ‘the people’, he led them through difficult times with courage; his presence at the sit-in venue avowed his resilience. He could have accepted an offer from PML-N or the non-political forces in the country, but he chose otherwise. He remained loyal to the mission and the moral community.

In return, people also showed their loyalty and willingness. They came out at Khadim Rizvi's call on various occasions. They came out when the court gave its verdict against Mumtaz Qadri. They blockaded Rawalpindi on Qadri's funeral, and they blockaded the province after the amendments in the Election Act were passed. In the 2018 election, they changed their loyalties and voted for TLP.

## Conclusion

How did TLP become the third-largest party in Punjab in its first election? This question is significant when key elements of Punjab's electoral politics are considered. In a province where voters prefer candidates to parties and choose personal benefits, it was difficult for a newcomer, religious party to attract voters, especially when it lagged in several aspects: vote bank, electables, party structure, and experience in Punjab's electoral politics. Khadim Rizvi's religious populism filled the above gaps. With a clear understanding of the target audience, he mesmerised people with the poetry of Iqbal and Ahmed Raza Barelvi and promised them the implementation of the Prophet's system. He promised them the protection of sanctity of prophethood and Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

No other party, contesting elections in Punjab, campaigned on a sub-sectarian basis (on such a large scale). Although the voters of some religiopolitical parties, such as JUI-F and JI, belonged to a particular sect, their leadership avoided emphasising the sectarian aspect. Only TLP did this. Khadim Rizvi affirmed his position regarding sectarian and sub-sectarian standing. He not only criticised Shi'ite parties and groups for desecrating Sahabas' sanctity, but also mocked Deobandis and Salafists. His views about seculars and liberals in Pakistan were disapproving and hostile. Reducing minorities, mainly Christians and Hindus, to second-grade citizenship, he criticised all those politicians who attended minorities' events or participated in their ceremonies. However, his campaign was not limited to only hate, abusing or mocking.

Arguably the most dangerous trend he promoted was acting against the blasphemous, particularly concerning the Prophet's sanctity. Although blasphemy laws were already strict in Pakistan (Yusuf, 2018), he upped the ante.<sup>9</sup> He encouraged people to take the law into their own hands and act against the blasphemous without hesitation (Hashim, 2018a). Those who acted were hailed as heroes. The resolute devotees who publicised their acts proudly were portrayed as an inspiration for the people because they had done Islam service by killing the blasphemous. His backing for potential ghazis (those who act against the blasphemous) challenged the state law.

However, for most of his followers, arguments emphasising state law and the right to live did not matter. (In Punjab, the debate on Salman Taseer's killing was fierce. Mumtaz Qadri's support was significant, and those who considered his action illegal and unjustified found it nearly impossible to say so publicly. An important reason for the people's firm support for Mumtaz Qadri was the sensitivity attached to the Prophet's sanctity.) Khadim Rizvi's point of focus made him popular; other religious parties had not used blasphemy issue, nor had they claimed to be the watchmen of the Prophet's sanctity. He used one of the most sensitive issues for Muslims in Pakistan, especially Punjab, that attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters – in a country already in the spotlight for radicalism, extremism, sectarianism and violence.

It is difficult to make any strong prediction about Khadim Rizvi's (or his TLP's) future. Already he has defied the conventional wisdom of politics of Punjab, Pakistan. It is also difficult to equate his TLP with other religious parties in the Muslim-majority countries, partly because the former has not followed their feats. TLP's future in Pakistani politics is yet unclear. In the 2018 election, weak institutions and the party system in Pakistan helped it survive and attract voters. But political developments in the coming years may change the institutions and party system. Whether TLP contests the 2023 elections in Punjab is yet to be seen. It would also be early to comment on

whether TLP allies with another political party or contests the coming election alone. The uncertainty concerning Khadim Rizvi's relations with the military establishment and his political legacy inadvertently limit any forecast on the future of TLP in Punjab. But how it became the third-largest party in Punjab still warrants more research that may shed light on TLP voters' perceptions, beliefs and the factors underpinning their resilience.

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## Notes

1. All translations from Urdu and Punjabi are the authors' own, unless otherwise indicated. Most of them are not available online.
2. A TLP leader called it the most important cause. Authors' interview with a TLP (Punjab) leader, Multan, 24 November 2018.
3. Authors' interview with a TLP MNA candidate Rawalpindi, 7 July 2018.
4. General Faiz Hameed (who now heads Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, ISI) mediated the November 27 agreement.
5. Authors' interview with TLP MNA candidate, Vehari, 1 July 2018.
6. Authors' interview with TLP MNA candidate, Vehari, 30 June 2018.
7. In Punjab, after PTI and PML-N, TLP had the highest total (1,876,265). On the other hand, in 2018, MMA polled 433,960 votes in Punjab. In 2013, with MMA dissolved, the top two parties of MMA, JUI-F and JI, polled 152,298 and 489,772 votes, respectively, in the province. In the 2008 elections, MMA had 160,515 (0.78 percent) votes in the province.
8. Our study highlights the problem with the theory, supported by news outlets in Pakistan, that TLP's rise cost mainly PML-N (Chaudhry, 2018). Some reports highlighted TLP's impact on PML-N and downplayed others (Jafri and Abbasi, 2018). But the data suggests otherwise. Out of the 33 seats the above graph mentions, PTI won 15, PML-N won 13, PPP and independents won two each, and PML won one. PTI was runner-up on 14, PML-N was runner-up on 13, independents finished second on five, and JD stood second on one (also see Geo News, 2018).
9. In 2014, Rashid Rehman, the lawyer of blasphemy-accused Junaid Hafeez (sentenced to death) was fatally shot in his office (BBC, 2014). In November, a Christian couple was thrown into a kiln furnace (Amnesty International, 2016). In 2018, interior minister Ahsan Iqbal was shot. The houses of former Law Minister Zahid Hamid and a member of parliament were attacked (The News, 2017c). In March 2019, a student stabbed his professor to death over his anti-Islam remarks (Zafar, 2019). In July 2020, a blasphemy-accused was fatally shot in a courtroom (Masood, 2020).

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