

The Centre Always Wins: Imran Khan's Populism in Pakistan and Ethnic Recoil of a Majoritarian Federation

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Summary:

This chapter examines the ruptures within Pakistan's federal structure in the aftermath of Imran Khan's political downfall, arguing that recent events have exposed the federation's long-standing institutional fragilities. Anchored in a centralised and majoritarian framework, Pakistan's federal model continues to marginalise its multiethnic peripheries and regional grievances. While Khan's populist challenge intensified regional discontent, the underlying causes — demographic dominance, coercive centralism, and the erosion of constitutional federalism — predated him. The chapter further analyses Pakistan's post-2024 electoral dynamics, the rise of regional contestation, and the increasing role of extra-constitutional bodies, such as the SIFC. It also explores how the 2025 military conflict with India temporarily neutralised internal dissent by reasserting Pakistan's unitary nationalist reflex. Rather than resolving tensions, the federation relies on moments of crisis to defer structural recalibration. In tracing these dynamics, the chapter contends that Pakistan's federalism, far from enabling pluralist governance, reinforces a political logic in which, regardless of disruption or dissent, the centre always wins.