

Age of Intolerance: Global Populism and the Decline of Democracy in the 21st Century

Muneeb Qadir, *Age of Intolerance: Global Populism and the Decline of Democracy in the 21st Century*, (Sang-e-Meel, 2025)

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This book entitled ‘Age of Intolerance: Global Populism & Decline of Democracy in the 21st Century’ was published by Sang-e-Meel in 2025. It was written by Muneeb Qadir, a practicing lawyer and Professor of Human Rights Law and Constitutional Law in Lahore. Having received his postgraduate qualification in Human Rights from the School of Advanced Study at the University of London, his works focus on religious extremism and class struggle in Pakistan. The argument put forward by Qadir in this book relates to the erosion of democratic principles and the rise of populist leaders in the 21st century. Rather than focusing on any particular country or regime, he takes a broader approach and, through a number of examples, attempts to establish a clear pattern which shows how the state of modern politics has allowed populist leaders to emerge on a global scale. The book is divided into six parts, each of which seeks to examine the same issue across different contexts.

In the first chapter of his book, the author critically analyses the political career of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan. He details how Khan rose to power by identifying himself as an “outsider” who promised to cleanse the system by targeting

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political corruption. Pakistani politics, which had been dominated by party dynasties up till this point, was in dire need of an outside voice, one which would represent the people, argued Khan. Through this depiction, Qadir establishes one of the many arguments populists use in order to gain power. This chapter goes through the entirety of Imran Khan's political career, with increased focus on the 2013 and 2018 elections, his term as Prime Minister, and his ouster through a vote of no-confidence.

While Imran Khan remains immensely popular in the country to this day, the author's analysis highlights how many of the former Prime Minister's flaws are brushed under the rug by his supporters. The populist rhetoric espoused by Khan did, in many ways, erode the country's democratic institutions. By highlighting the use of emotionally charged rhetoric, the weakening of civil discourse and, most damningly, his alignment with far-right parties, the author highlights the tangible ways in which Khan's movement damaged the country.

Given the current political state of the country and Imran Khan's aforementioned popularity, his supporters may be inclined to label the author an establishment lackey. However, his arguments are not baseless, as these are reflective of the ground facts. His arguments depict the concerns of a Pakistani citizen aspiring for political stability in the country. Primarily, the author has tried to highlight how the populist rhetoric is employed to influence the masses and seize power.

The author also discusses the policies of the populist leaders when in power. Narendra Modi's ascendancy to the power corridor and impact on Indian politics is cited as an example. It is a fact that under Modi's leadership Hindutva ideology has flourished, and BJP's

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Hindu nationalism has become the face of India's foreign policy. Author refers to BJP's control over the country's media. The targeting of the country's judicial system and bureaucracy to further reinforce Hindu supremacy. Modi's fascist political government has also abrogated the special status of Kashmir. Thus, India's democratic institutions are being shaped by ethno-religious nationalist rhetoric.

The author explains very effectively how the advanced 'liberal democracies' are not immune to the rising trend of populism. The example of West is given to support the argument. Western democracies have long since lauded freedom of speech, the strength of political institutions, and the sanctity of elections as the safeguards against tyranny. However, as showcased by Donald Trump's electoral win and his narrative to 'Make America Great Again' is a testament to the fact that through the power of populism, controversial figures, like Trump can become a leader.

The book also discusses the increase in populism in Europe. The far-right surge in Europe is largely due to Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments. These sentiments have provided a space for populist leaders to grow. This aspect was apparent in the Brexit movement, wherein the populace lost trust in liberal cosmopolitanism, and identity and culture led the course. The increasing popularity of right-leaning leaders such as Marine Le Pen and Victor Orbán also highlights the failures of liberal institutions and their ineffectiveness when faced with populist movements. While the decline of European democracies is masked by electoral legitimacy, popular discourse continues to be eroded as a result of identity politics and authoritarian populism.

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The author exposes the hollowness of the self-awarded moral superiority of liberal democracies. The popular presentation of Israel as a bastion of liberal democratic values in the Middle East has eroded and the true nature of Israel as a fascistic ethno-religious nationalist state has been laid bare. Despite this, western media platforms refuse to criticise the Jewish state. While politicians in the west never get tired of highlighting Russian war crimes in Ukraine or the lack of individual freedoms in China, their inability to condemn Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people showcases the selective empathy of the global north. The genocide in Gaza is not just a humanitarian catastrophe, but a democratic one wherein discourse is controlled and information is manipulated on a global scale.

The rise of populist movements is one of the pre-eminent political and social issues of the current era. The erosion of democratic norms and the emergence of leaders who rule by manipulating popular sentiment is a prelude to the rise of authoritarianism and tyranny. Charismatic figures who claim to represent the masses against the established elites undeniably appeal to a sense of social justice which resides in all of us. However, while they manipulate these sentiments in order to seize power, rarely do populists enact policies which tangibly improve the lives of the masses.

The main criticism that can be levied against Qadir's argument is that it lacks focus on a key part of the process which gives rise to populist movements. Such political transformations do not occur in a vacuum. The rise of populists is always preceded by rising discontent amongst the masses and the growing sentiment that their views and needs are not properly represented by the current political system of the society they live in. While Qadir briefly touches upon this point in each chapter, in my opinion an entire section of the book ought to have been dedicated to the factors which influence societies towards

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finding populists appealing. By focusing too much of his time criticising the actions and policies of populist leaders, he slightly undermines his own argument (despite its overall validity). Ultimately, Qadir's analysis provides valuable insight into the populist playbook and how charismatic leaders challenge democratic norms in order to seize power and accurately contextualises many of the major political transformations we are witnessing today. ■