



## DYNASTIC POLITICS IN PAKISTAN: THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF MARYAM NAWAZ (PML-N) AND BILAWAL BHUTTO ZARDARI (PPP) IN LEGITIMIZING THEIR LEADERSHIP

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### Abstract

One characteristic of South Asian democracies, particularly Pakistan, has been dynastic politics. This study examines the use of language by Maryam Nawaz of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to justify their leadership. Five campaign speeches (jalsas) by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are analyzed to examine how they use key terms such as legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny in their campaign discourse. Through qualitative analysis, the study brings to the fore how these leaders draw upon family legacies to reinforce their claims to political power and ensure their continued dominance within their respective parties. This research contributes to the existing literature on dynastic politics by focusing on the rhetorical mechanisms that render political heirs legitimate in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** *Dynastic Politics, Legacy, Blood, Sacrifice, Destiny, Leadership, Political Succession, PMLN, PPP.*

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## 1.Introduction

A notable feature of the politics of Pakistan is dynastic politics, where power has been concentrated in the hands of a few influential families for generations (Zaman, 2002). Among their political heirs are Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari who inherit the political legacies of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto respectively. The process of succession is not only used to legitimize their leadership but also it is entrenched in their public appearances, their political speeches (Cohen, 2004). Terms such as legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny are commonly employed in their campaign speeches to create legitimacy and link their political futures to their family history (Hyland, 2004). Recent research tends to highlight the use that these leaders make of emotional and genealogical rhetoric to preserve their political power, with research being conducted showing that dynastical rhetoric is what fortifies elite networks with minimal coverage for democratic competition, in as much as they make resolutions that point out the influence of lineages and authority from the family (Bibi 2025). Experimental evidence further indicates how the and while in Turkey, voters may experience the dynamics of dynastic politicians as they are less responsive or capable than their non-dynastic leader, as this argues against the legitimacy of inherited leadership. Additionally, political discourse analysis indicates that these forms of rhetoric have a role in political polarization in Pakistan (Munir, 2024), which provides more insight into the role of dynastic rhetoric in democratic determinants as well as voter behavior. This research investigates the ways Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari use themes such as legacy, sacrifice and destiny to prove themselves in the wheel of Pakistan's dynastic political system based on recent researches of political rhetoric and electoralization (Kuraishi, 2024; Saeed et al., 2024).

### 1.1.Background to the Study

In Pakistan, dynastic politics dates back to the 1960s where the political families such as the Bhuttos and the Sharifs started to take control of the political arena. The Pakistan people party (PPP) as well as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz have both led the party and their leadership has mostly been affected by family affiliations and historical backgrounds (Cohen, 2004). The elongation of political supremacies among generations has also strengthened these dynastic regimes such that the son or daughter of the predecessor takes up the same type of political power (Zaman, 2002).

Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are the political successors of the dynasties whose political projects are still going on in their father's footsteps. This study is concerned with the language employed by these leaders particularly in their election speeches so as to render their legitimacy and link leadership to family sacrifice and tradition (Luhmann, 2000). These rhetorical devices are important in the perceptions and

allegations of the voters making it perpetuate the dynastic state of the Pakistani political system (Weldon, 2007).

### 1.2. Rationale of the Study

The dynastic politics is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan but little is known about the language that the political successors use to justify their power. This study acknowledges this gap by discussing how Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari exploit certain rhetorical devices in their speeches to create the narrative of an established rightful choice of successor. The language of succession is essential in understanding the nature of power in South Asian politics, particularly in the country where politics are usually based on familial ties as opposed to democratic elections.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

1. To identify the role of language in the legitimization of leadership by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in terms of their family legacies.
2. To determine the means they use in creating their political identity as their rightful heirs to the political power of their families.
3. To investigate the application of the major themes such as legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny, and their role in strengthening their political power.

### 1.4. Research Questions

- Q1: How do language and leadership legitimization between Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari work in regards to their family legacy?
- Q2: Which rhetorical means do they use to create their political identity as the rightful heirs to the political power of their families?
- Q3: How do their speeches including the themes of legacy, blood, sacrifice and destiny sort to form the legitimacy and political support?

### 1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is important in comprehending how the politics of dynasty in Pakistan is not only regarding succession, but also the manner in which language is employed to influence the political legitimacy. The paper provides some observations on the rhetoric of succession in politics, the attractiveness of the family name in politics, and the application of emotional pleas in campaigning by examining the speeches of Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. It adds to the wider discipline of political rhetoric since it is dedicated to the dynastic politics of South Asia and examines how the family relationships are used in the political context.

## 2.Literature Review

Dynastic politics, expected to be used only in South Asian political systems, ensures the concentration of power in influential families and is manifest particularly well in Pakistan where the Bhutto and the Sharif have been highly involved (Zaman, 2002). These political dynasties are rooted in family tradition that maintains political control within the family for generations and the successors are seen as being legitimate heirs to the struggles and accomplishments of the family ancestors (Cohen, 2004). Rhetorical appeals like legacy, sacrifice and destiny for example are popularly used by leaders like Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to claim leaderships, emotionalize the political discourse helps to create connections with people by presenting themselves as continuity with their moral polity visions of the family (Hyland, 2004; Weldon, 2007). Recent studies discuss how maintenance of political family supremacy can have implications for democratic institutions by amplifying intra-party hierarchies within these parties and undermining the fostering of leadership through merit. Recent scholarship addresses the impact that the continuing dominance of political families might have on democratic institutions (Begum, 2025; Razzaq, 2025) by reinforcing intra-party hierarchies within political parties under the hegemony of politically powerful families and reducing opportunities for fostering leadership through merit. Studies on current-political communication allow further inferences about the reinforcement role of the elite rhetorical in Pakistan's post-truth political culture: namely, elite rhetoric reinforces the symbolic legitimacy of dynastic leaders by linking their authority not to accountability of performance, but to tradition (Kuraishi, 2024). Moreover, discourse analyses indicate that the rhetoric and style of arguments in the speeches delivered by such leaders tend to show a pattern of political polarization and exclusionary discourses where language is used strategically to mobilize and determine the level of politics in modern electoral contexts (Munir, 2024; Saeed et al., 2024).

## 3.Research Methodology

The research design adopted in this study was qualitative research with a rhetorical analysis of speeches given by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari during elections. Five speeches of each leader were evaluated in the study. The main source of data was the transcript of the speeches of the election campaign by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (jalsas). The speeches were obtained in the form of publicly available sources such as the media and the official party websites. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Themes including legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny were determined with the interest of how these themes are applied to justify leadership. Comparative analysis was also made in order to analyze the differences and similarities of the rhetoric strategies of the two leaders.

### 3.1.Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the rhetorical theory and the dynastic politics theory. It used the political legitimacy theory (Luhmann, 2000), the formation of legitimacy based on communication and discourse. Dynastic succession was also applied in the analysis especially in the interpretation of how heirs apply language to identify themselves with the legacies of their predecessors.

### 4.Discussion

In their election speeches, Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari used the most important rhetoric questions, which are the legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny to justify their positions as leaders. The researcher analyzed particular passages in their speeches, made conclusions with what other researchers have already conducted research, and discussed the topic comparatively to make an implication on how these themes were employed to construct political succession.

#### 4.1.Maryam Nawaz Speeches: Themes of Legacy, Blood, and Sacrifice

Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of the late Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, often reminds the legacy and sacrifice of her father to make an appearance as a natural successor to the political leadership of PMLN. These are the themes which she is entrenched in during her speeches and especially during the situations when she had to defend the legality of her ruling amidst the critics and her political enemies. Some of the most important passages of her speeches are given below.

##### 4.1.1. Legacy

*My father, Nawaz Sharif, has sacrificed his life to make this country and not his own. Not only is his legacy associated with power, but it is also the vision of a prosperous Pakistan" (Speech, Jalsa 2018)*

Maryam Nawaz focuses on the legacy of her father in this passage, but she puts it on the level of the collective success, meaning that her political legacy is an extension of his ideals. This links her leadership with the sacrifice of her father on the country and she is an heir to his political legacy.

##### 4.1.2. Blood

*The blood of the innocent people who perished in the name of the democracy is in my veins and I wear it proudly. Maintaining our political adventure, it is the blood that makes us stand erect against the people that seek to ruin institutions of our country, it is the blood that provides us with the power to rise up (Speech, Jalsa 2019)*

In this speech Maryam Nawaz uses metaphor of blood to relate her identity as an individual to the political struggle of her father. She is led by blood ties which seem to imply that, this is not solely a familial inheritance but rather a moral and emotional obligation to carry on with the work of her father.

#### 4.1.3. Sacrifice

*I have the exile, when I miss my family because of this country. However, it is the sacrifice of my father, as well as the sacrifices of my family, that we have to make to get a free and just Pakistan" ( Speech, Jalsa 2020)*

In this instance, Maryam Nawaz appeals to the idea of sacrifice to support the idea that the political past of the family of Nawaz is based on the personal and community anguish. She employs this theme to state that her leadership is not a right but a heavy load that she bears due to sacrifice and devotion to the well-being of the country.

#### 4.2.The Speeches: Legacy, Destiny, and Sacrifice of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari also seeks to draw on his family name to give credence to his leadership in the PPP. In his speeches, he frequently mentions the sacrifice of his mother, Benazir Bhutto and the heritage of his grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to reiterate his right to head the party.

##### 4.2.1. Legacy

*The legacy of my family is not only the political authority, but also the representation of justice and democracy. My struggle is the struggle of the PPP, and I am taking that inheritance with me as I proceeds (Speech, Jalsa 2018)*

In this speech, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari stresses over the PPP legacy and its relation to his own identity. He identifies with the historical struggles of the party and therefore presents himself as the heir obvious to further the political cause of his family, thus making his leadership the extension of their struggle to obtain justice and democracy.

##### 4.2.2. Destiny

*This does not only concern being the son of Benazir Bhutto but also the fulfilment of the legacy of those who sacrificed their lives to this country. I will bring the PPP to greater heights, just like my mother did to bring this country where I belong" (Speech, Jalsa 2020)*

The destiny frame, which Bilawal Bhutto Zardari uses, makes his leadership seem like something that had to happen, and was predestined by the divinity. He appeals to the idea of destiny to show his leadership as the creation not of political gambul and politics,

but of a more noble cause in the sacrifices of his family and the democratic fight of the nation.

#### 4.2.3. Sacrifice

*My political career is based on the martyrdom of my mother, Benazir Bhutto. It is her sacrifice that I am still fighting on behalf of the people of Pakistan" (Speech, Jalsa 2019)*

The sacrifice is a key message of Bilawal, which is why his speeches put his leadership in the context of the work of his mother and as a sign of her sacrifice. This theme makes his case of legitimacy stronger, since this theme makes him agree with the martyrdom of his mother and makes his leadership look not only ethically justified, but also a historically important one.

#### 4.3. Comparative Discussion: Thematic Analysis as a part of the prior research.

The rhetorical strategies used by both Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in speeches are similar and especially the legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny. This is also in line with the views of other past researches on dynastic politics in South Asia that point out that political offspring usually use such emotional and family pleas to win their way to power (Cohen, 2004; Weldon, 2007).

One of the themes that are repeated in the speeches of both leaders is legacy, which makes them the legitimate successors of the political vision of their families. The fact that Maryam Nawaz centered her argument on the legacy of her father is similar to the point by Zaman (2002) that dynastic politics in Pakistan tend to rely on the sustenance of political legacies between generations. The destiny is also a very critical rhetoric strategy that Bilawal has used in his speeches and this might represent a wider trend in South Asian political dynasties of trying to position succession as a phenomenon of God or fate (Hyland, 2004). This is an indication of the wider cultural and emotional environment in which the power of politics is commonly considered as both a gift and a curse.

Both leaders also use blood and sacrifice to develop emotional attachment to the audience. The mention of blood by Maryam Nawaz makes her identify with the sacrifices of her family, whereas the significance of the sacrifice of his mother by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari makes his leadership morally well-grounded. According to previous research (Weldon, 2007), such emotional appeals are very essential in the maintenance of political loyalty of the electorate particularly when the political power is passed within a family.

An important distinction between their rhetorical approaches, however, is the fact that each leader relied on the family heritage. Although Maryam Nawaz tends to make her leadership a continuation of her father in the context of a particular political agenda,

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari presents himself as the inheritor of the legacy of her mother, as well as as the fulfillment of a destiny. This indicates a somewhat more mystic or unavoidable perspective of leadership in the situation of Bilawal as opposed to the more practical and duty-focused story of Maryam Nawaz.

#### 4.4. Correlation with Previous Research

Research that has been conducted on political rhetoric in South Asia has revealed that dynastic leaders tend to use the sacrifice story to explain their rule (Cohen, 2004; Zaman, 2002). This is most prominent in the speeches of both Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari who abound with reference to the sacrifices of their families as they attempt to establish their leadership position. According to Weldon (2007), utilization of sacrifice as an element in dynastic politics is not merely on self-sufferance, but also as a way of positioning the political successor as a martyr who carries on the battle of the family.

Dynastic politics in South Asian context have been studied further by other scholars like Cohen (2004), Zaman (2002) who have examined how political heirs have been able to utilize these themes to create a narrative of possible succession. This paper will add to this literature by offering an in-depth discussion of how invoking blood ties and sacrifices (as particular rhetoric devices) are employed by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to increase the legitimacy of their leadership. There is another comparative aspect related to this research, which is the consideration of how the speeches of each of the leaders are associated with the overall cultural and political background of the dynastic politics in Pakistan.

#### 5. Findings

The analysis of the rhetorical elements of the five speeches provided by Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari reveals the main themes, which serve as the central focus of their rhetoric: the legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny. All these were employed as political tactics to justify their leadership roles as the successors of the Sharif and Bhutto dynastic parties. The results of the analysis are under.

**Legacy:** A common element of political legitimacy of the two leaders was a reference to their family legacy. The speeches of Maryam Nawaz focused on the political legacy of her father and his fight against democracy which makes her leadership a continuation of the vision of her father. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari also employed his family legacy, especially that of his mother and grandfather in the political struggles of both to win his right to gain the leadership of the PPP.

**Blood:** The application of the metaphor of blood was common in the speeches of both leaders and represented the kinship of the leaders with their leaders. Maryam Nawaz

cited the blood of her father, Nawaz Sharif, as the reason of her strength and will. Equally, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari used the name of his mother, Benazir Bhutto, to abbreviate his obligation to carry on with her sacrifice and political agenda.

**Sacrifice:** Sacrifice was one of the major themes behind the rhetoric of both leaders. Maryam Nawaz made regular allusions to the sacrifices of her father and the Sharif family, and these sacrifices were critical to her leadership. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, in his turn, emphasized on the martyrdom of his mother and placed the latter on the center of his political career.

**Destiny:** Although both leaders referred to the concept of destiny, it was stronger in the discussions that Bilawal made. He placed his leadership in the context of a predetermined fate and bigger divine plan to continue the work of his family. Maryam Nawaz, however, emphasized more on the aspect of duty and sacrifice, though she at times alluded to the fact that she could not avoid the fate of furthering the political legacy of her father.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of the current paper demonstrate that the two politicians Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari employ rhetorical appeals in order to justify their leadership in the framework of dynastic politics. The two leaders are extensively noodling on the themes of legacy, blood, sacrifice, and destiny to create a narrative of proper succession, showing themselves as inheritors of political influence in their families.

These results can be employed into the overall discussion of the dynastic politics particularly within the South Asia region by showing the way language is employed to construct and sustain the political legitimacy. Another thing on which the study lays emphasis is how rhetoric determines the perception of leadership by the masses implying that the dynastic successors such as Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are using emotional appeals to establish their right to leadership. By doing so, they put their political emergence into perspective not only as the issue of succession, but rather, as the issue of moral and political obligation to carry on the dynasties of their families. This paper points at the prevailing nature of dynastic politics in Pakistan and the role that rhetoric plays in ensuring legitimacy. With the growing dependence of political leaders on rhetorical practices to reach out to the electorate, it is important to comprehend how language can determine the political discourse, to the political analyst as well as the citizen. The development of such legitimacy-building strategies in relation to the varying political and social conditions and the people and their attitudes towards the dynastic leadership may be researched in future.

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