

Is Imran Khan Narcissistic? A Critical, Evidence-Based Analysis

Areez Tariq

Independent Political Analyst

Email: areeztariqkhan@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores whether former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan exhibits narcissistic traits in his political behavior and leadership style. It situates the inquiry within political psychology, drawing on definitions of narcissism in leadership, existing discourse about Khan's rhetoric and public conduct, and relevant scholarly frameworks. While there are claims and critiques suggesting narcissistic tendencies, the literature does not provide clinical proof—only analytical interpretations based on political behavior and rhetoric.

Keywords: Imran Khan; Political Narcissism; Leadership Style; Political Psychology; Populism; Charismatic Authority; Pakistan Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Narcissism—in psychology—is characterized by grandiosity, a need for admiration, self-centered behavior, and lack of empathy (DSM-5 criteria). Political leaders may exhibit narcissistic traits without qualifying for a clinical diagnosis; political psychology often assesses these traits through rhetoric, decision-making, and public behavior rather than psychological testing. Evaluating Imran Khan in this context means examining whether his actions and communications align with known markers of narcissistic political leadership.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NARCISSISM AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Research indicates that narcissistic individuals in positions of leadership can prioritize personal ambition over collective interests and use grandiose rhetoric to appeal to followers. Narcissistic traits relevant in politics include:

- Grandiose self-image and self-promotion
- Intolerance of criticism
- Polarizing and confrontational rhetoric
- Centering the narrative around the self

Scholarship on narcissistic leadership suggests that such traits may help leaders attract attention and followers but can undermine institutional norms and inclusive decision-making. Empirical

studies of general political personality traits link narcissism to self-focus and dominance in leader conduct, though not all charismatic leaders are narcissistic.

3. EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENTS SUGGESTING NARCISSISTIC TRAITS IN IMRAN KHAN

3.1. RHETORIC AND PUBLIC CONDUCT

Several commentators and analysts note that Khan's public rhetoric often centers on grand claims and confrontational positions:

- Op-eds describe his rhetoric as polarizing and organized around hubris or self-importance, focusing less on collective policymaking and more on personal narratives and conflicts with institutions.
- Political narratives around his "Us vs. Them" schematic—where dissent is framed as external threat—mirror patterns seen in leaders with narcissistic tendencies.

3.2. POLITICAL BEHAVIOR AND POPULIST APPEAL

Opinion pieces and political analyses have described Khan's leadership style in terms suggestive of narcissism:

- His persistent focus on personal vindication against rivals (including the military, courts, and political opponents) has been labeled by critics as narcissistic politics, prioritizing personal narrative over collaborative governance.
- Khan's ability to generate a devoted following has led some analysts to compare his leadership to personality-driven politics, where loyalty centers more on the leader's image than policy substance.

3.3. ACCUSATIONS FROM POLITICAL FIGURES

In December 2025, Pakistan's military publicly described Khan as a "narcissist" in the context of political conflict, alleging his ambitions undermine broader governance norms. This, however, is a political statement rather than clinical evidence.

4. COUNTER ARGUMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

4.1. LACK OF CLINICAL EVIDENCE

No peer-reviewed clinical psychological assessment of Imran Khan has been published. Claims of narcissism in political rhetoric are interpretive, not medical diagnoses. Scholars caution against diagnosing public figures without rigorous clinical tools and ethical evaluation.

4.2. CHARISMA VS. NARCISSISM

Scholars distinguish charismatic leadership from narcissistic leadership. Charismatic leaders can draw strong followings without pathological self-regard. Some commentators argue that traits attributed to Khan—like confidence and assertiveness—may reflect political charisma rather than narcissistic personality disorder.

4.3. COMPLEX PERSONALITY PORTRAIT

Profiles of Khan describe aspects of his leadership style that do not neatly fit narcissism, such as social welfare interests and public resilience. Critics note that not all self-focus equates to narcissistic pathology, and political

leaders often adopt bold rhetoric as strategy rather than self-absorption.

5. DISCUSSION

In analyzing narcissism in public figures, it is essential to distinguish between clinical diagnosis and behavioral interpretation. Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) requires formal psychological assessment and cannot be conclusively identified through public behavior alone. Political psychology, however, provides analytical frameworks to examine leadership styles, rhetorical strategies, and patterns of self-representation that may resemble narcissistic traits, particularly among leaders who cultivate strong personal brands.

In the case of Imran Khan, critics highlight recurring patterns of self-promotion, political confrontation, and exclusionary rhetoric, which they argue are consistent with certain narcissistic tendencies observed in political leadership. These interpretations often emphasize his centralization of authority, moral absolutism, and portrayal of political opposition as illegitimate or corrupt.

Conversely, supporters and some scholars caution against reductive labeling. They argue that Khan's leadership style is better understood as a form of charismatic and populist leadership, shaped by Pakistan's volatile political environment and mass-mobilization politics. From this perspective, behaviors perceived as narcissistic may instead reflect strategic communication, ideological commitment, or adaptive leadership in a polarized political system. This divergence underscores the subjective nature of behavioral interpretation in political leadership analysis.

6. CONCLUSION

There is no academic consensus or clinical evidence to support the assertion that Imran Khan suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Nonetheless, political psychology and media discourse frequently identify elements of his leadership—such as grandiosity, confrontational engagement, and charismatic self-framing—that correspond with narcissistic tendencies commonly discussed in the study of political behavior.

While such traits can offer valuable insights into leadership dynamics, scholars must exercise caution to avoid conflating political style with psychological pathology. Without direct clinical evaluation, definitive psychological labeling remains speculative. Despite these limitations,

political psychology frameworks remain a useful and legitimate tool for interpreting leadership behavior, particularly in contemporary political contexts where personalization, media visibility, and populist narratives play a central role.

REFERENCES

- [1] Analysis of narcissistic political rhetoric and its effects on polarization and leadership.
- [2] Commentary on narcissistic politics in Pakistan and the role of personalized leadership.
- [3] Discussion of charismatic vs. narcissistic leadership types in political contexts.
- [4] Observation on the difference between political commentary and clinical diagnosis in high-profile leaders.
- [5] Report on political actors describing former PM Imran Khan's behavior in terms of narcissistic ambition (political conflict context).

Received on 02-01-2026

Accepted on 15-01-2026

Published on 25-01-2026

© 2026; Areez Tariq; Licensee ATSK Publishers.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits unrestricted, noncommercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.