

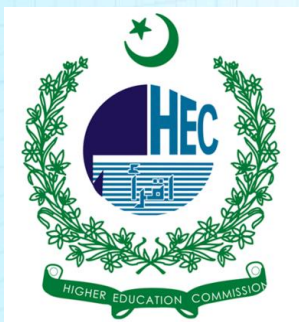
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**A Socio-Cognitive Construction of Moral Resistance: A
Comparative Analysis of Mandela's "I am Prepared To Die" and
Imran Khan's "Open Letter from Prison"**



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Abstract

This research explores how political imprisonment is culturally redefined and justified as moral authority and collective way of injustice. It focuses on Nelson Mandela's "I Am Prepared to Die" (1964) and Imran Khan's Second Open Letter to the Chief of Army Staff (2025) and his Message from Adiala Jail - August 2, 2025. The study interprets resistance as caused by shared cognitive models and ideologically infused knowledge and language structures through van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach under Critical Discourse Analysis. Both works use purposeful language and cognitive approaches to reframe imprisonment as moral justification rather than legal responsibility. The preferred or planned language, thoughtful pronoun, evaluative lexis, presuppositions, and strong moral argumentation—all of which promote in-group solidarity against government and institutional power—are all analyzed. The study reveals related socio-cognitive factors influencing popular and morally strong perception and resistance narratives world wide.

Introduction

Discourse analysis is an essential, multidimensional study that focuses on language as a dynamic tool for social development in different context. Through different discourse forms, including written texts, informal chats, formal speeches, and increasingly digital communication, it uncovers the complex ways that language creates power relations and ideological beliefs (Smith, 2023). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) facilitates the discursive strategies that govern sociopolitical processes through a variety of theoretical perspectives (Jones, 2023). Within this framework, political discourse analysis (PDA) focuses on the rhetorical strategies used by politicians to create resistance, authority, and justification to their actions. This study uses van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to compare and contrast Imran Khan's and Nelson Mandela's narratives of political imprisonment. The study shows how, despite different historical and geopolitical contexts, both individuals use language and cognitive models to create moral legitimacy, inspire in-group cohesion, and challenge institutional authority through analyzing their key texts written while imprisoned.

Background to the Study

Political imprisonment has historically served as a testing ground for disagreements about identity, authority, and the legitimacy of ideologies. Leaders like Nelson Mandela, who utilized their imprisonment as a platform for moral resistance and national rebirth, have exemplified the symbolic power of imprisonment. Mandela's "I Am Prepared to Die" speech, delivered in 1964 during the apartheid state's systemic racial brutality, expressed a vision of justice founded on ethical values and collective struggle. Imran Khan's open letter and message from jail (2025), written decades later, also deal with questions of resistance, legitimacy, and institutional criticism, even though they take place inside the complex and dynamic socio-political environment of contemporary Pakistan. In both discourses, political isolation is defined not just as a physical restriction but also as an environment for the purposeful reconstruction of authority and unity.

Despite having distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts, these texts employ language to mobilize collective identity against supposed institutional illegitimacy and negotiate inequality of power. By contrasting these political imprisonment narratives, one can gain a critical understanding of the socio-cognitive processes through which imprisoned leaders mobilize shared cognitive models, ideological beliefs, and discursive strategies to reframe authority as ethical humiliation and to legitimate resistance movements. This study places itself at the nexus of discourse analysis, political discourse, and socio-cognitive theory in order to examine the linguistic and ideological processes that facilitate the reframing of imprisonment within opposing narratives in different contexts.

Objectives of the Study

1. to analyze and compare the discursive strategies employed by Nelson Mandela and Imran Khan in their writings on political imprisonment, with a focus on how language fosters moral legitimacy, in-group cohesion, and the delegitimization of institutional authority.
2. to investigate the socio-cognitive processes, as defined by van Dijk's framework, that both leaders use to activate common mental models and ideological beliefs in order to change public perception and resistance narratives while they are

imprisoned politically.

Questions of the Study

1. How can Mandela and Imran Khan challenge institutional authority while maintaining moral legitimacy and encouraging in-group cohesiveness in their accounts of captivity using linguistic devices like pronouns, evaluative lexis, and moral reasoning?
2. What ideological beliefs and sociocognitive processes are present in the writings of Mandela and Imran Khan, and how do these mechanisms serve to justify resistance and shape public perception in the context of political imprisonment?

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a powerful multidisciplinary framework for examining how language functions to establish, maintain, or question power relations in society. Fundamental to CDA is the notion that discourse is both socially conditioned and socially generative, both producing and reflecting ideology systems rooted in texts. Within this broad field, Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, which focuses on the cognitive aspects of discourse production and comprehension, such as shared mental models, socially distributed knowledge, and ideological concepts that influence how texts are constructed and interpreted. According to Van Dijk, these cognitive processes control how discourse and social structures interact, enabling language to function as a kind of social practice that molds beliefs and group affiliations (van Dijk, 1998; 2006).

The sociocognitive method emphasizes how speech incorporates systems of ideas and belief structures that are not directly visible but can be identified from repeating linguistic choices, narrative patterns, and semantic frameworks in political texts and public discourse. According to this understanding, speakers can strategically utilize mental models, cognitive representations of events, characters, and social relationships, to delegitimize opponents or promote unity. Therefore, understanding how political language either challenges or maintains power disparities depends heavily on cognitive processes.

Current CDA work demonstrates the value of sociocognitive analysis in a range of political contexts. Studies of Imran Khan's political speeches, for example, including

those delivered at international forums, demonstrate how rhetorical strategies such as polarization, positive self-representation, and negative other-presentation are employed to affect audience perception and political ideology (Hussain, 2018; Chaudhary & Nawaz, 2020). Socio-cognitive CDA applied to Pakistani political discourse shows how power is contested and challenged through lexical choices and self/other representation, further illuminating the ideological investment embedded in political language (Hussain, 2018).

Discourse analysis has also been used to Nelson Mandela's political speech, frequently using frameworks that emphasize ideology and positive discourse, which are consistent with socio-cognitive principles by looking at how language shapes intergroup relations. Research on Mandela's "I Am Prepared to Die" speech demonstrates how he gathered support for systemic change and opposed apartheid's power structures. According to studies, Mandela employed moral arguments, narrative frameworks, and pronouns to characterize injustice and reinterpret collective identity and resistance, which is consistent with van Dijk's focus on shared mental models that promote ideological coherence (Mnguni, 2017; Kumar, 2016).

While most research has focused on political rhetoric in general, few studies have specifically compared texts produced under contemporary political imprisonment with historically and contextually distinct prisoner discourses, such as Mandela's trial address. The body of study on Mandela focuses on how his discourse changed public opinion and provided support for resistance against systemic injustice. Additionally, it demonstrates how rhetorical strategies may affect long-term ideological shifts outside of specific legal situations (Mnguni, 2017; Fairclough, 2001). On the other hand, studies of Imran Khan's speech have tended to concentrate more on generic political speeches or persuasive rhetoric than on long-term stories of imprisonment and resistance. Therefore, even though CDA study has extensively studied political power, ideology, and discourse through both van Dijk's socio-cognitive lens and related frameworks, there is still a glaring gap in comparative studies of imprisonment narratives expressed by politically imprisoned leaders from various sociopolitical contexts. This study attempts to bridge that gap by examining the convergent socio-cognitive mechanisms via which language is employed to

negotiate identity, legitimacy, and resistance in the face of institutional limitation through a comparison of Mandela's and Khan's writings from prison.

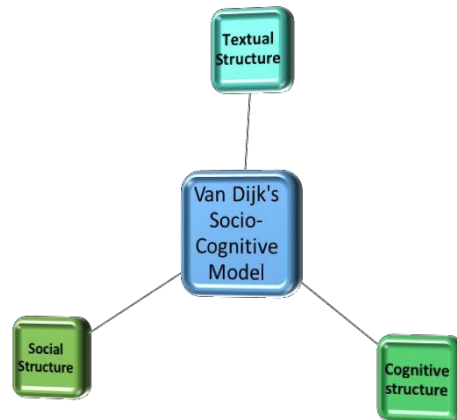
Despite the abundance of literature on Critical Discourse Analysis and the socio-cognitive framework developed by van Dijk, there is still a significant shortcoming of comparative studies that specifically address the discursive construction of political imprisonment across historically and geopolitically distinct contexts. Although many studies have examined Mandela's jail discourse and its important role in the anti-apartheid campaign, while others have examined Imran Khan's more general political speech and public rhetoric, a comprehensive comparison of their prison writings is conspicuously lacking. Existing studies often focus on different contextual or ideological frameworks, isolating these individuals inside their unique sociopolitical settings, rather than doing cross-contextual comparative study that demonstrates similar discursive and cognitive procedures. Additionally, prior research has largely ignored the complex cognitive processes involved in institutional limits like jail in favor of focusing on charismatic leadership or general political speech acts. This deference limits our understanding of how politicians, when physically bound or weak, utilize language to challenge prevailing institutional narratives, foster in-group cohesion, and restore moral legitimacy. The complex connections between ideology, communication, and cognition in the articulation of resistance in prison settings are therefore little understood. In addition to improving theoretical models within Critical Discourse Analysis, filling this gap would enhance our understanding of political resistance as cognitive-linguistic phenomena that cross beyond political, cultural, and historical borders. By comparing Mandela's and Imran Khan's imprisonment texts using van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA framework, the current study aims to close this gap by revealing common linguistic and ideological tactics that express resistance and legitimacy in the face of brutal state power.

Theoretical Framework (van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model)

"Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analysis that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and deal in social and political contexts." Van Dijk (2004) Van Dijk

introduces the fundamental methods of the "Ideological square" (2005) to examine an ideological discourse based on four principles: Self and Others' Representation.

Figure1: VanDijk Socio-Cognitive Model



Data Source

The study's primary sources of information are Imran Khan's Second Open Letter to the Chief of Army Staff (08 February 2025), coupled with his message from Adiala Jail(02 August 2025) and Nelson Mandela's "I Am Prepared to Die" speech during his 1964 Rivonia Trial. These pieces were selected because to their iconic significance in expressing political opposition while imprisoned in drastically different historical and social contexts. These texts provide rich linguistic and ideological material for analyzing the construction of moral legitimacy, in-group solidarity, and institutional authority delegitimation using van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of text analysis. To ensure contextual integrity and authenticity, the study uses the original, publicly available transcripts and letters.

The ethical guidelines relevant to discourse research are strictly followed in this work, especially while handling and interpreting politically sensitive materials. There are no clear concerns about participant permission or confidentiality because the data is made up of publicly accessible speeches and letters from well-known political personalities. The analysis does, however, take care to preserve the original texts' context and integrity, avoiding decontextualization or misinterpretation that might affect the intended meanings. The study also takes into account the possible political impacts of comparative discourse analysis in order to offer an objective, balanced interpretation free from ideological bias or exaggeration.

Analysis and Findings

Understanding political prison texts within a socio-cognitive perspective is crucial because they are not just records of incarceration but also powerful ways for shaping public opinion, moral judgment, and collective identity. A sociocognitive method demonstrates how language activates shared mental models, ideological beliefs, and deeply rooted moral beliefs that allow jailed leaders to question institutional authority and defend resistance. This perspective reveals how pronouns, evaluative lexis, and moral appeals operate at the cognitive level, explaining why certain narratives resonate deeply with the public despite severe limits on political activity. Therefore, analyzing political speech via a socio-cognitive perspective uncovers the many ways that resistance is cognitively normalized, authority is contested, and ideology is replicated in societies under political repression.

1. Linguistics Strategies employed by Nelson Mandela and Imran Khan in their writings on political imprisonment

Nelson Mandela

a. Challenging the Authority

Mandela openly criticizes the apartheid state's narrative and puts question on the credibility of its accusations in order to threaten its power. He expresses his own personal and social identity based on African experience in response to the allegations that the battle is impacted by "foreigners or communists".

"I have done whatever I did, both as an individual and as a leader of my people, because of my experience in South Africa and my own proudly felt African background, and not because of what any outsider might have said."(Mandela,1964).

Mandela challenges the state's authority by attributing his acts to genuine, internal emotions, which disproves the state's allegation that the resistance is being manipulated.

He further distances himself from "terrorism" by describing the political violence he meant as a last option against oppression.

"I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of

my people by the Whites.” (Mandela, 1964).

Here, Mandela presents the state as unfair and weakens its power by redefining institutional violence as oppression and dictatorship.

The state is shown as undemocratic and brutal.

“The Government had decided to rule by force alone..... A massive show of force designed to intimidate the people.” (Mandela, 1964)

Here power is ethically reversed by using such lexis, he is making the state the aggressor.

b. Ensuring Credibility and Validity

Mandela maintains his moral legitimacy by situating his actions within the context of a fair and moral struggle against systemic injustice. He draws on the cultural and historical legacy of his people

“In my youth in the Transkei I listened to the elders of my tribe telling stories of the old days. Amongst the tales they related to me were those of wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland.” (Mandela, 1964).

His cause is rooted in noble heritage by relating it to ancestral bravery, implying continuity with a fair conflict, and making it morally justified.

Additionally, he clearly distinguishes his group from acts of terrorism or indiscriminate violence.

“The violence which we chose to adopt was not terrorism... We believe that South Africa belongs to all the people who live in it, and not to one group, be it black or white (Mandela, 1964).

This statement strengthens his ethical position by reaffirming his dedication to justice and non-racism. Mandela also offers a logical moral defense of using violence, seeing it as an unavoidable reaction to the blockage of lawful and nonviolent means.

“All lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle... closed by legislation...we chose to defy the law.” (Mandela, 1964).

Here Mandela defends his resistance as a moral defense against structural injustice by demonstrating that all nonviolent options had been explored.

Mandela consistently emphasizes self-control and discipline, which highlights ethical authority.

“This campaign was based on the principles of passive resistance.....More than 8,500 people defied apartheid laws and went to jail. Yet there was not a single instance of violence.....The Judge found that discipline and non-violence had been stressed throughout.” (Mandela, 1964).

These arguments highlight Mandela's moral superiority by portraying resistance as moral rather than chaotic.

Mandela exposes the state's laws as unfair and undemocratic, weakening its credibility. “The African people were not part of the Government and did not make the laws by which they were governed.....For us to accept the banning was equivalent to accepting the silencing of the Africans for all time.” (Mandela, 1964)

Here, he uses democratic reasoning to question power normatively rather than emotionally.

c. Promoting and Maintaining unity within the group

Mandela promotes solidarity among those who have suffered for freedom by using collective shared language and inclusive pronouns

“I have done whatever I did, both as an individual and as a leader of my people....We who formed Umkhonto were all members of the African National Congress...” (Mandela, 1964). here he makes everyone equally responsible which makes the people feel more connected and united against the system.

In order to improve ties among the community, he also highlights the African people's common history and culture.

“The names of Dingane and Bambata, Hintsa and Makana, Squngthi and Dalasile, Moshoeshe and Sekhukhuni, were praised as the glory of the entire African nation.” (Mandela, 1964).

This is a reminder of shared memories and identities which unites the people both philosophically and emotionally.

Mandela uses inclusive language and a common struggle to foster unity.

“We believed it was our duty to preserve this organization.....We had no doubt that we had to continue the fight.....We of the ANC had always stood for a non-racial democracy.” (Mandela, 1964).

The repeating "we" unites leaders and followers into a single moral community.

Imran Khan

a. Challenging the Authority

Imran Khan exposes the wrongdoings and corrupt practices of the military and governmental institutions, directly challenging them and undermining their legitimacy. He calls out the military's involvement in human rights violations and political manipulation.

“The manipulation of election results through pre-poll rigging orchestrated by intelligence agencies, the forced passage of the 26th Constitutional Amendment in Parliament at gunpoint....The army is a vital institution of the country, but a few black sheep within it are causing severe damage to its reputation....One such individual..... is blatantly violating the constitution....”(Khan, 2025a).

By pointing out specific examples of oppression and labeling the military as an oppressive "Occupying force," Khan questions institutional legitimacy and portrays the administration as lawbreakers.

“This system of darkness....Modern-day slavery...All institutions have been crippled and fundamental rights suspended.” (Khan, 2025a).

Khan uses highly moralized rhetoric to destabilize political institutions by portraying power as repressive and evil rather than legitimate.

b. Ensuring Credibility and Validity

Khan regularly justifies his imprisonment and resistance by citing his moral principles and feeling of patriotism.

“I wrote an open letter ... in the best interest of the nation, aiming to bridge the widening gulf between the military and the people....I am the former Prime Minister of Pakistan and the leader of the country’s largest and most popular political party. I have spent my entire life elevating the name of Pakistan on the global stage....My life and death are inextricably linked to Pakistan.”(Khan, 2025a).

Here he highlights the unjust conditions of his imprisonment in order to evoke sympathy and highlight the lawlessness of his imprisonment.

“I was placed in solitary confinement in a death-row cell for 20 days,Electricity to my cell was cut off, leaving me in total darkness....Despite clear orders from the Islamabad High Court, I am not permitted to meet my wife.”

(Khan, 2025a).

His ethical truthfulness is strengthened by these accounts of pain, which support his moral stance as a victim of unfair persecution.

Khan develops moral authority by portraying resistance as a noble national responsibility rather than a personal act of disobedience.

“Every Pakistani must join the movement for genuine freedom against the system of oppression imposed on our country....The movement... will continue until democracy is restored in its true spirit.” (Khan, 2025a).

These claims ethically uplift resistance by linking protest with freedom and democracy, and create sympathy for him.

c. Promoting and Maintaining unity within the group

Khan promotes unity among his followers and the general public by using inclusive pronouns and shared language.

“My concern is forthe growing divide between the people and their armed forces....I highlighted six key points in my letter, and if public opinion is sought, 90% of the people would agree with them...My party members travel long distances to visit me, yet they are denied access despite court directives.” (Khan, 2025a).

Here Khan makes a clear distinction between the oppressed "in-group" and the repressive "out-group" of state institutions by often pointing to "our army," "the people," and "my party members." The use of pronouns reinforces a common identity and group effort.

Additionally, he makes use of the concepts of communal destiny and national unity.

“My life and death are inextricably linked to Pakistan...The army is a vital institution of the country...” (Khan, 2025a).

Such statements strengthen a feeling of shared devotion and a single cause despite ongoing disputes. Khan frequently uses collective pronouns to bring both the audience and self into a moral community.

“If we stand united and resist, this system of darkness will inevitably collapse....We too must rise against this corrupt regime (Khan, 2025a).

The pronoun "we" cognitively transforms individual leadership into collective effort.

2. Shaping Public Perception through Sociocognitive Processes

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela's jail speech reveals a complex web of sociocognitive processes and ideological beliefs that make resistance ethically acceptable and cognitively unavoidable rather than ideologically violent. Mandela consistently creates a causal mental model in which opposing movement is primarily sparked by state brutality, clearly stating that.

“a Government which uses force to maintain its rule teaches the oppressed to use force to oppose it (Mandela, 1964).

This approach allows resistance to be seen as a learned and forced response rather than a conscious acceptance of violence by switching responsibility from the oppressed to the institutional actor. He says that his worldview is further supported by moral responsibility, as he clearly says.

“it would be unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non-violence at a time when the Government met our peaceful demands with force,” (Mandela, 1964).

It's a sentence that, in the context of institutional oppression, cognitively reframes nonviolence as ethical irresponsibility rather than virtue.

Additionally, Mandela purposefully employs collective pronouns, connecting personal power with group consciousness through phrases like:

“we who had taken this decision... felt morally obliged to do what we did,” (Mandela, 1964).

Thus, in-group solidarity is strengthened and accountability is spread across the liberation movement.

Importantly, by distinguishing between terrorism and sabotage, he presents a sophisticated moral hierarchy of violence, highlighting that:

“sabotage did not involve loss of life” (Mandela, 1964).

Considering that participants were advised:

“on no account... to injure or kill people,” (Mandela, 1964).

It normalizes minimal resistance while maintaining ethical legitimacy. He claims that:

“we believed that South Africa belongs to all the people who live in it, and not to one

group”. (Mandela, 1964).

Here he prevents opposition from being conceptually construed as racial vengeance by activating an inclusive ideological framework. Together, these discursive strategies influence public opinion by turning political imprisonment into proof of moral sacrifice, portraying Mandela as a morally responsible person.

Imran Khan

Similar to this, Imran Khan's jail speech shows a complex arrangement of sociocognitive processes and ideological beliefs that justify resistance, challenge institutional authority, and influence public opinion in favor of him. A victim-oppressor mental model, developed through a thorough list of state violence, is at the heart of Khan's ideological framing. In this model, institutional authority is cognitively linked to illegitimacy and violence rather than governance. This is effectively expressed in the lengthy argument that:

“extreme violence was unleashed on our unarmed pro-democracy supporters... peaceful civilians were directly shot at... state security agencies have raided the homes of hundreds of thousands of our supporters, arrested over 20,000 of them, abducted and tortured many, and detained thousands on baseless charges for months (Khan, 2025b).

A unified sentence style that creates a common mental image of institutional suppression rather than isolated mistreatment by overpowering the reader with repetition of “our supporters” and “our women,”. Khan promotes in-group solidarity by cognitively connecting individual suffering to collective identity through the use of possessive pronouns. Furthermore, moral reliability is reinforced by evaluative language such: “*shameful*,” “*disgraceful*,” and “*moral decline*,” especially here in this sentence “the treatment meted out to our women over the past three years is shameful and disgraceful,” which portrays governmental activities as morally objectionable in addition to being illegal. Khan uses religious and cultural frameworks to further emphasize this moral critique, saying that:

“during the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), women, the elderly, and children were not harassed”. (Khan, 2025b).

Consequently, he establishes his criticism in an Islamic moral world that connects

deeply with Pakistani public opinion and redefines institutional actions as religious sins rather than differences in politics. Furthermore, his speech develops a socioeconomic perspective on the country's collapse, as seen by his claim that; “by dishonoring the people’s mandate... a political crisis has been engineered, plunging the economy into chaos,” (Khan, 2025b).

It encourages readers to view imprisonment as a sign of the nation's decline rather than as an individual issue by directly connecting political repression to economic collapse. Furthermore, Khan avoids completely destroying the military by admitting that;

“our soldiers are sacrificing their lives for Pakistan, a calculated ideological step that keeps the organization apart from what he describes as illegal behavior, upholding moral discipline and avoiding offending prospective allies within the military. The summary of the discourse is based on prescriptive moral reasoning that: “The military must return to its constitutional boundaries, disengage from politics, and focus on its designated duties,” (Khan, 2025b).

These linguistic choices together affect public image by presenting resistance as a moral obligation arising from religious, constitutional, and humanitarian conditions rather as individual ambition or political rebellion, and by depicting Khan's imprisonment as evidence of principled resistance.

Conclusion

It is clear from the study of Imran Khan's writings during imprisonment and Nelson Mandela's jail speech that both men have a strong intellectual resistance. Despite various historical and political contexts, each portrays resistance as a morally necessary response to institutional pressure rather than as disobedience. Mandela's claim that persistent state aggression makes resistance inevitable is remarkably similar to Khan's depiction of systemic repression through enforced disappearances, court manipulation, and civilian targeting. Both leaders present the state as the primary cause of moral decay in their cognition-based cause-and-effect narratives. Through collective references and inclusive pronouns, personal suffering is discursively transformed into societal injustice, enabling imprisonment to function symbolically as sacrifice rather than crime. Therefore, based on shared suffering and past experience,

resistance is justified as a moral duty.

It is similarly important to note how Mandela and Khan deliberately regulate the ethical scope of resistance in order to confront institutional authority while maintaining moral credibility. Khan's difference between the military as a national institution and the immoral activities of certain of its members is comparable to Mandela's strict difference between terrorism and sabotage, as well as his concern for avoiding victims. This discursive control prevents resistance from being cognitively constructed as anarchy or revenge. Furthermore, both leaders base their arguments on higher ethical orders: Mandela cites democratic principles, human dignity, and non-racialism, while Khan mobilizes constitutionalism, religious ethics, and cultural values. By activating deeply rooted moral beliefs inside the public mind, these comparable strategies allow public to alter perception, preserve in-group cohesiveness, and assert ethical authority despite institutional constraints.

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