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Popular Sovereignty and State Accountability: A brief Analysis of Operation Sindoor

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between popular sovereignty and state accountability through a brief analysis of Operation Sindoor in Contemporary India. In democratic political theory, popular sovereignty means political authority derives its legitimacy from the people while state accountability ensures that such authority remains subject to public accountability and democratic scrutiny. Against this theoretical background, the paper explores how Operation Sindoor was linked with national interest, security and collective identity. The idea of Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke have been used to analyse the relationship between sovereign authority and democratic accountability in context of contemporary governance. Using qualitative discourse analysis, this paper examines official statements, media reports and public narratives associated with the operation. The study observes that while operation was carried out as an expression of sovereign authority, it also raises the important questions regarding democratic accountability, transparency and relationship between state power and public legitimacy. The paper concludes that in contemporary democratic governance, public trust and political legitimacy are very much important tool to exercise any authority.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the leading democracies or also called as the mother of democracy. And in modern democratic states, democratic legitimacy can be traced through five faced prism 1) Representation 2) Accountability 3) Transparency 4) Effectiveness and 5) Deliberation. Hence, it can be noted that governments right to exercise power is justified by the consent of the governed. As according to Schaar legitimacy can be accounted as authority only if state fulfils following mandate, electoral or constitutional right to rule, the procedural or normative rightfulness in exercise of rule and substantive or teleological rightness in ends of rule. However, contemporary governance increasingly operate through narratives of national security, collective identity, and public legitimacy that shapes how state authority is understood and justified.

The background of Operation Sindoor was such a critical environment where state's action was later publicly represented through broader themes of national interest, sovereignty and collective security. And the expectation of citizens surrounding the operation reflected patriotism, unity and protection of citizens, thereby linking state authority with the interest of the nation. Such representations are politically very important because they influence the construction of legitimacy with symbolic and communicative means.

The paper argues that Operation Sindoor reflects how state authority is influenced through appeals of collective national identity and public interest and how state, in order to make itself legitimate has to cater the demands of general public.

This paper examines the relationship between popular sovereignty and state accountability through a brief analysis of Operation Sindoor. No attempts have been made to evaluate the operational or administrative aspects of the event. It exclusively focuses on its symbolic and political dimensions. This paper asks- To what extent public sentiments of national interest and public security influence the state actions undertaken aligning with principal of sovereignty and accountability simultaneously.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Popular Sovereignty

The Classical theory of sovereignty assumes that the bearer of sovereignty is the state, or the government. This was the unanimous opinion of Bodin

and Hobbes.(Merriam, 1900: 38) Before Rousseau, there was no prevalent idea that people, citizens or social groups can be sovereign, but it was Rousseau who claimed that sovereignty can rest only with people, they are the origin and bearer of the sovereignty. Earlier thinkers did not make any attempt to differentiate community from the state, for them they were the same thing. (Hinsley, 1986: 155)For him, sovereignty pertains to political communities. In The Social Contract, Rousseau argues that Sovereignty ultimately belongs to collective will of citizens rather than rulers or institutions.

So in simple words, popular sovereignty means the real source of political power is the people. The state do not possess authority on its own rather, it's authority becomes legitimate because it claims to represent and protect the interest of the people. In modern governance, governments often justify their actions by referring to national interest, public welfare and collective security. When the state presents its actions as necessary for protecting citizens or safeguarding the nation, it symbolically connects its authority with the collective will of the people. This connection between the state action and public interest reflects the idea of popular sovereignty because public legitimacy is derived from the belief that the state acts on the behalf of the society.

State Accountability

On one hand sovereignty provides legitimacy to political authority and on the other hand accountability ensure that such authority remains answerable to the people. As according to John Locke, governments have power in trust for societies and governments remain accountable to citizen through consent and responsibility. The governments are expected to justify their decisions and actions publicly. Accountability ensures that the state power is not exercised arbitrarily or without responsibility.

Thus political legitimacy depends not only on authority, but also upon transparency and justification of state action in which individual needs and aspirations should be catered. In matters of national security accountability becomes especially important where state exercises its exceptional powers to secure the life, dignity and property of its citizens. Democratic governance requires that the actions taken by the state in name of the public interest must be subjected to scrutiny justification and institutional responsibility.

Nationalism and Legitimacy

The modern political legitimacy is reinforced through nationalism and collective identity. In modern times nationalism is taken as source of modern political legitimacy, which says that the national boundaries should align with the territorial boundaries which also shows that state's right to rule is justified only when there is an alignment with cultural historical or civil boundaries of the people or nation. (Ernst Gellner)¹

In *Imagined Communities* Anderson explains that nation is a socially constructed community imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of that group through shared narrative symbols and media representations. Through symbol's, media narratives, public speeches and ideas of national unity, citizens develop emotional attachment toward the nation, and the state. This collective identity becomes politically significant because it helps the state present its action as being undertaken in the interest of nation as a whole. Legitimacy in this context refers to the public acceptance of political authority as rightful and justified. When state actions are framed as protecting national security preserving unity and defending collective interest, they are more likely to receive public support and moral justification.

Thus political discourse plays an important role in connecting state action with collective identity and public legitimacy. The narratives of national security, unity and sovereignty is directly linked with public support of state authority by creating a discourse of taking political action with the interest of the nation. This kind of narratives help to legitimize the sovereignty while simultaneously influencing public perception of accountability and democratic responsibility. Legitimacy is not only about having rights to make laws for the betterment of the people of a country rather, legitimacy is also about people's trust in the state for the protection of life, liberty and property and ensuring security. And for that, no established rule or law, as far as my knowledge, is there which tells how state is going to do so be it protecting their rights within the territorial sphere of the country or protecting it from foreign attacks whether from nations or non state actors. Therefore, nationalism contributes to legitimacy by symbolically

connecting state authority with the identity, emotions and perceived interests of the people.

3. OPERATION SINDOOR AND SOVEREIGN LEGITIMACY

Operation Sindoor which was a decisive 2025 Indian counter-terrorism operation in response to the Pahalgam Attack², redefined India's sovereign legitimacy. The public discourse regarding Operation Sindoor was such that it was emphasising national security, public protection and sovereign responsibility. Official communication about the operation was highlighted through the necessity of decisive state action to safeguard the collective national interest. Such representations contributed to the construction of political legitimacy by aligning the state authority with public welfare and national unity.

This Operation was not presented only as an administrative exercise but rather the expression of sovereign responsibility undertaken on the behalf of the citizens. Indian leadership explicitly framed the precision strike as a direct reflection of public will. The defence minister stated that campaign was a "reflection of the feelings of millions of people of the country"³ positioning the military response as an execution of public's demand for justice. The name of the operation itself carried deep cultural and civic weight, where the sindoor referenced the vermilion worn by married women. The government's message was directly tied to protecting the citizens families, stating that, because terrorist targeted the sanctuaries of citizen's household, India destroyed the headquarters of the terror.⁴

According to the principal of popular sovereignty, there is a social contract between the government and people to defend its populace from foreign backed proxy warfare. Operation Sindoor was expression of such popular sovereignty.

This action very well supported the idea of popular sovereignty in which political authority derives its legitimacy by representing collective interests of the public. Thus a public consensus was created surrounding the operation, who connected the state action with the idea of protecting the nation and preserving collective security.

The very important role in the whole scenario was of the fourth pillar of the democracy that is media which played a significant role in reinforcing these

¹ Congruence Principle of Theory of Nationalism by Ernst Gellner

² 22 April 2025 in Jammu Kashmir killing 26 civilians

³ Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on AIR May 19 2026

⁴ PIB, 14 May 2025 titled Operation SINDOOR : India's Strategic clarity and Calculated Force

narratives. News coverage very well included the themes like patriotism, unity and national interest, thereby strengthening the symbolic identification between citizens and state authority. Media also contributed to construct the sovereign legitimacy by consistent emphasis on collective responsibility and national protection.

One important thing to be noted here is that the relationship between sovereignty and accountability, however, remains complex. While the narratives of national security about the state ensuring the security of the people may strengthen the public legitimacy, but it also raises very important question regarding the democratic scrutiny and public accountability. It is true that public sentiments surrounding the operation Sindoor were very high and supportive of the government's actions, but it is also to be noted here that in the democratic system state authority must remain answerable to citizens when exercised in the name of the national interest.

From Lockean perspective, legitimate depends not solely upon claims of public welfare, but also upon accountability and responsible exercise of power. Consequently, the state actions associated with the authority or security based governance must continue to operate between the framework of public justifications and democratic responsibility. Here, one thing to be noted is that this paper is not concerned with proving whether the Operation Sindoor was right or wrong, whether it stood on the scrutiny of democracy, our concern is theoretical linkage between sovereignty and accountability and how the popular sovereignty results in the actions of the state securing national interest.

Thus it was noted that Operation Sindoor was not only based on the popular democracy but also the very need and demand of the people towards the state to secure the national interest, to secure the sovereignty, not internally but also from the outside threat in this case from non state actors.

4. CONCLUSION

The relationship between popular sovereignty and state accountability remains central to democratic political theory and contemporary governance. It should be noted that the basis for the legitimate authority is provided by the security and authority, which remains connected to public consent and democratic responsibilities is ensured by accountability.

Operation Sindoor shows how the responsibility of national security and maintaining the sovereignty within the state and outside the state is the mere responsibility of citizens as well as the state which is supported by public and legitimised through the narratives of national security, collective identity and public interest. Through official communication and media representations, the operation was symbolically aimed as an exercise of sovereign responsibility undertaken on the behalf of the nation and citizens.

At the same time, the case also highlights even if the state action is legitimised by the citizen of that country, there is a continuing importance of accountability within the democratic system. The legitimacy of the state not depends upon the appeal to collective welfare, but also from the transparency justification and public trust. Therefore, it is assumed that democratic governance requires balancing sovereign authority with the mechanism of accountability and scrutiny.

The study concludes that contemporary legitimacy operates through the symbolic narratives that connects state power with the collective identity. It also simultaneously negotiates the expectation of democratic accountability. Operation Sindoor reflects this broader dynamic within the modern political democratic politics.

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