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The nexus of religious populism and digital authoritarianism in Pakistan

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BIOS

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have had a constant and rapid influence on the way the world operates in the 21st century. These technologies have changed the way individuals connect socially, participate in public debates and political discourse, and organize and mobilize for social change (Brown, Guskin, & Mitchell, 2012). Many of the upheavals from this century have shown the potential of digital tools to create social change in oppressive regimes, economic crises, occupation, conflict, and displacement. For example, social media has been stressed as a tool for citizen journalism in the contemporary era. Moreover, digital space has allowed new sorts of personal and public connections to emerge during the COVID-19 situation, especially regarding physical distance.

Despite the interest and optimism in the digital domain providing chances to construct better futures and just societies, the hazards and constraints remain immense (Al-Ali, 2020). Autocratic governments have used cyberspace to increase their influence. In addition, social media have become breeding grounds for the growing distrust between citizens and state institutions. Even in advanced consolidated democracies, cyberspace has been used to polarize, promoting radical solutions, thus undermining democracy. For instance, in the United States (US) the ascent of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in 2016, the US presidential election campaign was a 'rebellion' against the mainstream politics of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The erosion of trust in the established party power structures paved the way for these two "outsiders" to almost take control of the two parties. Social media played a pivotal role in garnering support for these leaders. Social media has been central to the advance of populist right-wing and neo-fascism. Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, and many others could not have won elections without the skillful use of social media in their campaigns. Paradoxically, however, social media is critical to mainstreaming the populist and radical left such as Alexis Tsipras in Greece, Bernie Sanders in the US, and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK. All these leaders are sustained by an active cyberspace where radical ideas were floated and popularized to eventually trickle down to generate real life political outcomes.

Pakistan is no exception to this global trend of increased politicization of cyberspace. While it remains a country where internet access is unevenly distributed, it is also one of the countries where the internet is comparatively cheap (Baluch and Musyani, 2020). Its huge population means that despite a small user base, the sheer number of users with access results in millions of users of the internet and allied services. It is speculated that between 2021 and 2022 alone some 22 million new users of the internet emerged in the country and at present only 36.5 percent of its population has access to the facility (Digital, 2022). While the internet was politically a largely irrelevant place, in recent years it has gained new significance in the country's politics.

The post-pandemic trends given in the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) Report 2021 indicate that coronavirus has resulted in an expansion of internet availability and usage where household ownership of mobile connections as well as internet subscriptions has seen unprecedented growth (PTA, 2021). Imran Khan's party, the PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf – Pakistan's Justice Movement), has used an active online presence to sway young voters, more than half of the country's population, to secure electoral victory (Jahangir, 2020). The military establishment has also increased its presence on the internet and has been constantly engaged in monitoring and harassment of individuals of susceptible loyalty in its eyes (Rehman, 2020). Both these entities combined also use cyberspace to promote their narratives. Between 2018 and early 2022, the PTI led by Imran Khan (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021), in a close relationship with the establishment, used authoritarian tactics, jailed critics on fake cases, pressurized judiciary, passed laws to curtail usage, and increased monitoring of social media (PTA, 2021: 13). It also used social media to promote majoritarian civilizational populist narratives on issues of critical importance. So, while PTI's stance today appears democratic and against the military's role in politics, it still wants the military to interfere and support it as the military did from 2017 to 2021 (Zehra, 2022).

Our paper focuses on this politically symbiotic relationship between a political party and the military elite in Pakistan to examine its use and abuse of online space. We try to navigate the landscape by exploring the means through which cyberspace has been reclaimed by these actors and weaponized against political opposition and civil society. The paper also examines how pre-existing socio-political issues such as a weak democratic setup, an interventionist military, civilizational populism, and majoritarianism have aided the growing cyber authoritarianism. To carry out our analysis we use a layered approach to explore the levels of authoritarianism. These are rooted in the framework used by (Howard, et al., 2011) which looks at four levels: full network, sub-network, proxies, and network nodes.

POLITICAL CONTEXT



Imran Khan, addresses a press briefing on April 20, 2016 in Islamabad.
Photo: Jahanzaib Naiyyer

The Civilizational Populist Party – Imran Khan's PTI

'Civilizational populism' is "a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people" (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022a; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022b). Established in 1996 by Pakistan's leading and beloved sportsman, Imran Khan (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a), the PTI (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b) is an Islamist civilizational populist party.nitially there was no clear ideology of the party as both left-wing and right-wing elements found a home in the PTI. Anti-corruption was the sole slogan but there was no solid plan on how to achieve this objective. The PTI was a party that was formed by a person, who belonged to the elite, spending all his adult life outside Pakistan, and marrying a very wealthy British aristocrat, who thought people should vote for him because he was a brilliant cricketer and philanthropist (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a). During the 1990s, Pakistan's economy nosedived as the two leading parties, the PPP and the PMLN, fought with each other. The military, although formally out of politics, played the moderator and kingmaker. In 1999, the military formally took over for the fourth time in Pakistan's history. General Musharraf was leading an economy

moving towards default in the early 2000s when the 9/11 attacks saved his military regime. In response to his prompt support for the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, billions of dollars of aid came to Pakistan. Pakistan became a significant partner of the United States, but it also resulted in a colossal cost to the Pakistani economy and society as terrorism increased. The country became a breeding ground for violence and mixed with corrupt leadership, the cause of human development was long forgotten.

Imran Khan initially supported Musharraf and his coup. He even supported Musharraf's farcical referendum and tried to negotiate a deal with him to be installed as a Prime Minister. In the early years of the party, Khan's advocacy for social welfare and his philanthropic activities earned him a modest following. But Musharraf knew Khan was not that popular, so he rejected the deal. Khan was already a critic of Musharraf's policies, so this became the final straw that broke the camel's back. Khan, from then onwards, became the most vociferous critic of Musharraf's support for the war on terror, even supporting the Taliban against Musharraf and the US (Findlay, 2021). Khan's support for the Taliban resonated with the masses who resented the US's historical role in Pakistan, Palestine, and the Arab world. The Iraq War further destroyed the sympathy that the US had after 9/11 in some sections of Pakistan's population. Khan and other PTI leaders used these issues to showcase the inability of the current military and political figures to feel the "pain" of the common citizens.

In the 2000s and early parts of 2010s, Khan used the growing cable television networks to increase his visibility. A lone man discussing the moral and national implications of American drone attacks on Pakistani soil, a sympathizer of the Taliban (framing them as decolonizers), calling out on corruption and promising social and political change garnered him considerable attention but he still could not become a popular leader (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021a). His party was just a small bunch of admirers. Despite his controversial positions on issues and untarnished political background, the PTI never became a significant player in politics until 2011 when the military decided to collaborate with him, and he dropped his anti-army stance (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b; Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022). Two years of strong support from the military resulted in PTI's first win in the 2013 general elections. The party won its first majority in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) by allying with right-wing political parties in 2013. Other political parties noticed and declared that PTI's rise was not entirely organic as it gained favorable support from the establishment. Despite its mediocre performance in KP, PTI's Islamist populism (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021b) combined with religious rhetoric and the strong support of the military and the judiciary, which removed and disqualified PM Nawaz Sharif for life, led it to become the party with the most seats in the National Assembly (NA) in 2018 general elections.

During its three-and-a-half years in power at the federal level, the party enjoyed a close relationship with the military until the relations went bitter in late 2021. During this small period of close collaboration of the civil government and the military, digital authoritarianism increased at all levels. While violence on the streets, rooted in political, ethnic, and religious differences, was nothing new, there was uncommon aggression towards those who opposed the highhandedness of the government or the military or voiced concern in online space. The issue of hundreds of Balochs and Pashtuns, who were abducted and incarcerated by the intelligence agencies without any legal authority and declared "missing persons" remained unaddressed by the government and judiciary. Self-censorship and legal laws to curtail cyber freedoms were ensnared at an unprecedented level (discussed below). PTI justified these measures as means of preserving the national security and morality of the youth. Ironically, the same laws that the PTI government framed during its tenure are now being used by the military to harass pro-PTI voices since Khan's exit from office in April 2022 (Naseer, 2022).

Khan's civilizational populism, which instrumentalizes religion, was a big factor in promoting digital authoritarianism during his premiership. Like other populist leaders and their parties, Khan and the PTI believed that no one could legitimately criticize them. All criticism of Khan and the PTI was illegal, biased, and against the nation and so should be stopped and punished by any means possible. This was, of course, the classic justification of authoritarian populism. Second, PTI's vision and campaign slogan was the recreation of the state of Madinah (Riyasat-e-Madina that Prophet Muhammad established in Central Arabia in the seventh century) in Pakistan. This not only attracted people to the PTI but also made PTI and Khan holy figures on a divine mission. Unsurprisingly, in a society like Pakistan where religion is important, those opposed to this divine mission were condemned, subjected to all kinds of hatred, and their rights to speech, expression, and movement were deniable. Hence, both populism and religious-oriented politics, allowed the PTI to execute and justify digital and non-digital authoritarianism. An important part of the PTI civilizational populist toolkit is misogyny. Misogyny is common to numerous populist parties and leaders as well as religious conservatives. Whether it is Trump and the Republican Party or Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), misogyny is regularly employed and is popular among the party activists. Khan has promoted numerous misogynistic ideas during his premiership, including linking violence against women to their conduct and dress, and the PTI has vigorously defended his reprehensible statement. He has also made sexist remarks against female politicians of other parties and used sexual innuendos against male opposition figures (The Express Tribune, 2022). In an interview when he was asked,

“You were also quoted as saying that the practice of women wearing veils ‘is to stop temptation, not every man has willpower’ (Daily Pakistan, 2021). You said on increasing vulgarity, will have consequences, and you were accused of rape victim blaming. How do you respond to that?” Imran Khan replied, “If a woman is wearing very few clothes, it will have an impact on the men unless they’re robots. I mean it is common sense.” Khan has also spoken regularly against pornography using religious edicts which, unsurprisingly, helps in justifying digital censorship (Daily Pakistan, 2021). The deadly nexus of religious populism and digital authoritarianism is not limited to Pakistan (now see in detail Yilmaz et al., 2022). In India, Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia, one can see similar dynamics. It does not matter whether the country is Muslim-majority or Hindu-majority, rich or poor, long-established democracy or a recent fragile democracy, the nexus between religious populism and digital authoritarianism is popular and successful (Yilmaz et al., 2022).



Guard of Honor Battalion of the Pakistan Army, during the official ceremony at the Aiwan-e-Sadr Presidential Palace of the President of Pakistan in Islamabad on November 3, 2015. Photo: Mirko Kuzmanovic.

The Authoritarian Institution: Establishment

The "establishment" is a name that has been given to the top brass of the Pakistani military which has a long history of interference, controlling, and shaping Pakistani politics. Out of 75 years of Pakistan's history, the military has directly ruled the country for 33 years. Even when the military is not ruling directly, it shapes the political landscape informally. The "kingmakers" have misused and abused their position by turning the military from a security force to not only a political entity but also the biggest business conglomerate in Pakistan that sells dairy products, meat, textiles, fertilizers, cement, land, houses, natural gas, oil, etc. The military also has universities, medical and engineering colleges, a sugar mill, and a bank. of dictatorships but with each successive phase of military dictatorships, the social and political fabric of the country has been redefined under authoritarianism. For instance, the early dictators such as Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan were instrumental in stifling the political growth of various forms in Pakistan. Ayub Khan's policies side-lined the unifying and democratic figure of Fatima Jinnah and normalized the suppression of political forces and election rigging. Combined both Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan's hijacking of politics and hostility towards the Bengali population led to a civil war which turned into a Bengali massacre by the Pakistan military resulting in the country losing East Pakistan and its transition into the independent state of Bangladesh.

Later, General Zia-ul-Haq also abused his power by not only dissolving assemblies and imposing martial law, but he also hanged former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after a dubious trial. The decade that followed led to the unprecedented integration of military officials into politics and civil bureaucracy. Politically, Zia-ul-Haq experimented with the Islamization of society, mainstreamed religious right-wing into politics, and groomed a new generation of right-wing political parties to counter existing political opposition in society. After Zia-ul-Haq's death, democracy returned but the military never left politics. It continued to manage politics until, as mentioned earlier, General Pervez Musharraf imposed the fourth martial law in 1999. Much like his predecessors, he disregarded the political, civil, and human rights of the Pakistanis for nearly another decade.

The establishment's position as the 'apex' institution, with no accountability, has culminated in a culture of oppression and violence. The military's spying agency the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) has unchecked power to surveil citizens and its power has led to countless cases of disappearances and deaths of political activists. Described as working for the 'national' interest, over the years, ISI and the military have expanded their 'security-driven' narrative to cyberspace. They have been directly involved in shaping policy to support their intrusive and unlawful oppression of citizens. The agency is also responsible for using online space to popularize fear of 'Jewish' and 'Indian' fake news and threats which it calls "fifth generation warfare". Overall, the military's authoritarian attributes and legacy have found themselves replicating in cyberspace.

While most people know that ISI conducts electronic surveillance and even Prime Minister Imran Khan has acknowledged that his phone may also be compromised, the ISI has no legal authority to establish an extensive, broad range surveillance system and monitor thousands of people. The role of the military can be gauged from the fact that often a retired military general is appointed as Chairman of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). The current PTA Chairman is retired Major General Amir Azeem Bajwa. Previously, in the mid-2000s Major General Shahzada Alam Malik was the Chairman of PTA (PTA 2021). Furthermore, the military also oversees a major portion of telecom/mobile operations in Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan through the Special Communications Organization (SCO), a public sector company under Pakistani military supervision (PTA, 2019: 21).

When an authoritarian force is combined with an Islamist civilizational populist it becomes a breeding ground for gross violations of human rights. This union while short-lived was quite a dark period for democracy in Pakistan. While the PTI is out of power, the legacy of digital authoritarianism and cyber oppression it left behind is now being weaponized against it by the very the establishment the PTI worked with while in power.

CONTEXT OF CYBER SPACE IN PAKISTAN



Photo: Aleksandar Malivuk.

Under such circumstances to no one's surprise, Freedom House rates the country as "partly free," giving it a score of 37 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2021). Pakistan not only has a low score, but it is also losing ground, particularly after 2018, when it had a score of 43. Since then, it had an election and a government that was generally perceived to have been greatly influenced by the military. The situation is considerably worse with respect to internet freedoms, which are even more restricted. The Freedom House gives it a score of only 26 out of a possible 100 points, and it is classified as "not free." (Freedom House, 2021). The score is based on three factors of internet freedom. Pakistan received only 6 points out of a possible 25 points for "obstacles to access," 13 points out of a possible 35 points for "content limitations," and 7 points out of a possible 40 points for "violation of user rights." Once again, one can see the declining trend in action (Freedom House, 2021). The figures provided by Freedom House mirror the reality of online and off space in Pakistan.The future of internet freedoms, and freedom overall is bleak in Pakistan as new regulations and allied bills have further increased the control of the government on the internet and social media. The military chief, General Qamar Bajwa warned the "internal enemies" and declared, "we will have to deal strictly with some internal elements spreading chaos." General Bajwa further said: "It is a moment of reflection for all of us that some people are being used by anti-state elements. This is called hybrid or fifth-generation war. Its purpose is to make Pakistan's roots hollow and damage the country's unity. InshAllah, we will never let these negative objectives succeed." (Dawn, 2021).

On the other hand, while still in power, Khan warned the nation, particularly the youth of the 'vices' of the internet and promised to 'protect them.' In one of his meetings, he urged for 'character building' of the youth and warned against the vices of the cyber world "Character building is very crucial in the modern tech-savvy era. The proliferation of tech gadgets and 3G/4G internet technology has made all sorts of content available to everyone [...] We need to protect our youth, especially kids, from being exposed to immoral and unethical content available online." (Jamal, 2021).

While Imran Khan constantly portrayed the internet as a den of vice and as a national security issue (Geo News, 2022) his party has used the space in the most effective way. PTI's media cell is one of the most organized on the internet and has used the platform to propagate its narratives, troll opposition and critics as well as shaped social media trends (Khalid, 2022; see details in the four levels of analysis section below).

The PTI government and the establishment supported each other in the violation of the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression granted by the 1973 Pakistani Constitution. The key internet governance institution in Pakistan is the PTA and it draws most of its powers from the PTA (Re-organization) (Amendment) Act, 2006. The legal framework is designed in such a way that PTA can itself or allow others to monitor, record, and survey all kinds of electronic communications. All kinds of electronic communications There is little transparency or accountability in the process. Thus, PTA has become a means of surveilling and shaping cyberspace. Pressures to curb 'terrorism' has led the military to push elected governments to pass laws such as The Fair Trial Act, 2013 and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. While on the surface this legislation is to prevent cybercrime, in reality, it enables further documentation and enhances the state's capability to legally surveil. However, despite its reach, legalized surveillance is only a small part of state surveillance. Civilian and intelligence agencies, working outside the legal sphere, use surveillance of the citizenry for what they call "national interest."

The last few years have seen a spike in cyber authoritarianism in Pakistan as both the PTI government and the military have used formal laws as well as illegal powers. Civil and political rights have taken a backseat as increased censorship and authoritarianism have prevailed. People have been abducted with no due process or legal authority because of their online activism or other 'crimes.'

FOUR LEVELS OF ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN PAKISTAN

The following four level of analysis of digital authoritarianism was first developed and used by (Howard, et al., 2011).

Full Network Level Governance

Internet shutdowns in cities, regions, or in the whole country are not uncommon in Pakistan but, despite PTA being the enforcer of these bans, its annual reports give no information about these shutdowns.

There are three types of full network shutdowns in Pakistan. Most common internet shutdowns are on prominent days in Pakistan's official calendar. Internet is not available on religious and national holidays as security agencies and the government believes there is a likelihood of terrorism on these occasions. So, almost every year, there is an internet shutdown in specific cities on significant holidays. Second, there are long-term regional shutdowns in areas mired in an insurgency. Areas in Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces suffer internet blackouts for weeks or more. The final type of internet shutdown is less related to political protests. These happen for a few hours or a day when the government tries to stifle a political protest. The reason given for the internet shutdown is again a terrorist threat, but the actual reason is more likely political. These short terms shutdowns are mostly done to stop mobilization as opposed to long term shutdowns in Balochistan and KP which are usually disciplinary mechanisms.

Full network internet shutdowns in Pakistan first began in 2005-2006 but became common in Pakistan after 2011.

Most often, it is the military intelligence agencies that ask for internet shutdowns as no evidence is asked from them. The actual process is that the ISI, Military Intelligence, or the civilian Intelligence Bureau asks the Ministry of Interior for an internet shutdown due to a viable threat. The National Crisis Management Cell (NCMC) in the Ministry then deliberates and usually, it requests the PTA to enforce the shutdown. The PTA then orders the internet service providers and telecom operators to shut down their internet operations. Unfortunately, the decision to shut down the internet is totally bureaucratic and there is no judicial or parliamentary input in it. Even post-facto accountability of the intelligence agencies or the NCMC is absent.

Pakistan is a poor developing country with a huge young population of more than a hundred million. There is a dire need to provide employment to this young population and internet and communication technologies (ICTs) can help. The Pakistani state has launched "Digital Pakistan" to tap young talent. Regular internet shutdowns, however, stifle ICT employment and disrupt communications, resulting in huge losses. The national exchequer lost an estimated 507 million Pakistani rupees ($49 million) in 2012 due to internet shutdowns in Pakistan during Eid, and another 500 million rupees in 2012 due to outages during Ashura (Wagner, 2018).

Sub-Network or Website Level Governance

Censorship at the website level is widespread in Pakistan. The censorship is done using section 37(2) of the Prevention of Electronic Crime Act (PECA), 2016. The federal government notified new "Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguards), Rules 2021" in October 2021. In the 2021 annual report of PTA, following the information given about banned or blocked websites:

Category	Websites blocked
Decency and Morality	903,074
Glory of Islam	77,692
Sectarian & Hate Speech	40,365
Defense of Pakistan	36,820
Proxy	10,219
Contempt of Court	8,673
Defamation/ Impersonation	8,673
Miscellaneous	6,562
Total	1,091,095

Source: PTA 2021

According to PTA 2019 Report, more than 824,000 websites were banned since the PTA's establishment. If we compare it with 2021 figures, it shows a more than 30 percent increase in the last two years, showing a great expansion in surveillance and punitive action (PTA 2019). Religion plays a major role in digital authoritarianism in Pakistan. Islam is used to justify a large number of internet curbs by the government. In the PTA 2021 Report, the highest number of websites banned (903,074 – 82 percent) was because of "Decency and Morality" which is linked to Islam. The second highest number of websites banned (77,692 – 7 percent) was for "Glory of Islam." The third highest number of websites banned (40,365 – 3.6 percent) were banned for Sectarian/Hate Speech, which is again related to Islam. Hence, around 93 percent of the websites banned are because of religious reasons one way or the other.

Proxy or Corporation Level Governance

Social media companies and other communication firms, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc. are major sources of information. They are called intermediaries as they host the content of individuals, businesses, groups, etc. Individuals and groups upload content to intermediaries and intermediaries allow it to be viewed by the world without prior screening. These intermediaries can only survive if they have legal immunity, and most countries give legal immunity to these firms.

The young generation does not get their news and information about what's happenings in the world or in their particular sector from newspapers or cable news, they rely on social media. Therefore, anyone who is concerned about controlling access to information or manipulating information must manage and rein in intermediaries. Hence, the PTI and the military also made sure to strengthen the PTA to threaten, penalize, and ban the operations of intermediaries.

In October 2020, the PTI government came up with new restrictive rules, called the Rules for Removal of Unlawful Online Content, 2020, for intermediaries. The justification for these restrictive rules was the proliferation of fake news and the threat to the privacy of ordinary Pakistanis but the reality was quite different. Under these new rules, the government did not remove the legal immunity of the intermediaries, but it tried to force them to accept orders regarding restricting their content based on local laws/culture and providing user data to the government whenever the government deems the content illegal. If these requests are denied, then the operations of these companies are threatened with closure. Pakistan has a long history of banning intermediaries. For instance, YouTube was banned in Pakistan from September 2012 to early 2016 after it refused to take down a crude anti-Islam inflammatory movie "Innocence of Muslims." More recently, in April 2021, all major social media companies were banned for a few hours because of the protests of Tehreek-e Labbaik Pakistan, a religious militant political party. The PTA also banned and then lifted the ban on TikTok several times in 2021

The new rules were so restrictive that Dawn, the most respected English newspaper in Pakistan, published a scathing editorial: "That the government is diligently laying the foundation for the large-scale digital surveillance of citizens is deeply unsettling. What is more disturbing is the secrecy with which all of this is being done, with even the tech companies complaining that they have been left in the dark. The clandestine nature of these rules and the key demands of the government to these tech companies suggest that something sinister is at play. That the authorities want citizen data to be stored in Pakistan so that they can access it without going through a legal process speaks volumes for the state's desperation to monitor citizens' movements online." (Dawn, 2020).

But the PTI government was not deterred by any national or

international criticism. In February 2022, just before its removal, the PTI government came up with another draconian law to restrict digital freedom. It promulgated an ordinance that amended the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) to make online criticism of government authorities, including the military and judiciary, a criminal offense. The offense was made non-bailable, with harsh punishment, increasing the fines and imprisonment up to five years. The courts were also ordered to decide the cases within six months and send monthly reports on proceedings.

Later, this amendment was declared unconstitutional by Chief Justice Athar Minallah of the Islamabad High Court. The irony is that since its removal from office, it's the PTI that is protesting and criticizing the military online, resulting in its repression by authorities. Imran Khan and his party leadership should be thanking the Islamabad High Court as they would have been facing even more repression, if the PECA amendment, initiated and defended by them in courts, was still law of the land..

POLITICAL CONTEXT



Photo: Shutterstock.

Network-Node or Individual Level Governance

Years of true civilian rule in Pakistan have been rare. Authoritarian states need surveillance to survive so surveillance has been part and parcel of a Pakistanis' life. As internet and communication technologies became available and popular in Pakistan, the state also increased its capabilities of electronic surveillance. After 9/11, during the "War on Terror," US assistance augmented and modernized Pakistan's surveillance architecture. This was a disastrous development for the people of Pakistan as the authoritarian state traced critical citizens using this new surveillance system and abducted, incarcerated, and tortured them. Pakistan's religious and ethnic minorities, journalists, human rights activists, feminists, etc. all suffer at the hands of the authoritarian state. Mehvish Ahmad and Rabia Mehmood have detailed the effects of surveillance: "Social media surveillance of critics of state policies has resulted in targeting of groups through infiltration, content monitoring, and interception, and has resulted in enforced disappearances, torture, arrests, interrogations, and confiscation of digital devices of those summoned by authorities. More indirect methods to censor dissent have also been taken into use: Pakistan has banned YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and websites run by religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities in part using surveillance technologies that allow them to uncover the details of administrators and moderators. Through this regulation of online

allowed some groups— for instance, pro-army propagandists or far-right Islamist extremists active on social media—to enjoy more space than others, effectively allowing the former to violently challenge journalists, political workers, dissidents, and others from rivalling factions." (Ahmad & Mehmood, 2017).

The PTI populist government, with the encouragement and support of the military, has arrested, jailed, and beaten people for speaking against Imran Khan, the military, or Islam. People have been charged and even sentenced to death for speaking against Islam. In January 2021, an antiterrorism court sentenced three men to death in the first case of cyber blasphemy (Asad, 2021). The case is under appeal but even an acquittal by superior courts will not save the victims as anyone accused of blasphemy is always under threat in Pakistan. Political criticism was repressed. In June 2019, Waleed Butt, a young leader of the PMLN party, was arrested for posting derogatory content against the judiciary, Imran Khan, and the military.

Journalists are particularly under threat if they criticize the military or Imran Khan. In September 2020, journalist Asad Ali Toor was arrested for using "derogatory language" against the military. After he was released in November, he was attacked at his home by suspected military intelligence agencies in 2021. In September 2020, journalist Bilal Farooqi was arrested (later released) for his social media posts against the military, and a sedition case was filed against journalist Absar Alam for Twitter posts. In April 2021, Absar was shot near his home and the police investigation of the murder attempt led to no arrests. Later, in an official meeting, PTI information minister Fawad Chaudhry denied Absar Alam and Asad Toor are journalists, thereby denying attacks on them are linked to their online writing and YouTube videos. Also in April, Sarmad Sultan, a social media activist went missing and his Twitter account was also taken down temporarily. He was released after outrage and a campaign on social media.

Women journalists critical of the PTI party and government suffered extreme online harassment. Gharidah Farooqi, Benazir Shah, and Asma Shirazi were victims of a targeted campaign led by PTI ministers and officeholders. As explained above, Imran Khan himself appears to be a misogynist and this helps in making the PTI particularly offensive towards women.

CONCLUSION

While the PTI is no longer in power, its cyberspace legislation has further enhanced the dominance of the military. In a karmic manner, the digital authoritarian laws legitimized by Islamist civilizational populism and created & used by the Imran Khan's PTI government are today being used against pro-PTI voices as arrests based on social media posts are being carried out.

Military dominance and authoritarianism have been part of Pakistan's history since the late 1950s. The establishment has a strong tradition of undemocratic, illegal, and unconstitutional behavior. While political parties change, the establishment has remained a constant and has grown in its authoritarian activities. It co-opts civil government to create an environment where fears of immorality and national security justify the introduction of draconian cyber laws, their heavy-handed enforcement. However, over the recent years, the military has gathered unparalleled power. Using religion and a security-driven national narrative, it has maintained its grasp on Pakistani society and politics. These conditions are now being replicated in cyberspace as well. The level of surveillance, blackouts, and control that are exerted by this institution is troubling for not only the future of cyberspace in Pakistan but also the country's chances of moving towards true democratic ideals.

Under a new series of laws between 2018 and 2022, the old frameworks have been revised to make room for more control over cyberspace which has resultantly turned into a highly surveilled and shrinking space for dissenting voices. When faith and national security narratives are used in combination, it convinces the masses of the necessity of authoritarianism. In addition, in a country like Pakistan, the establishment has no checks and balances on it which allows it for extrajudicial measures and activities in cyberspace. In such an environment, many critics have been forced into voluntary self-censorship and self-exile, while those still in Pakistan face grave consequences.

The nexus of religious populism and digital authoritarianism is not unique to Pakistan. As mentioned above, the same dynamics can be seen elsewhere such as India, Malaysia, Turkey, and Indonesia. While the military is an essential and crucial element in the rise of the PTI-led civilizational populism and digital authoritarianism in Pakistan, its role is non-existent in India and Malaysia, and in the case of Turkey, the military was initially working against the rise of religious populism. Therefore, one can conclude that civilizational populism is not dependent on military support.

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