

## Digital Media and the Transformation of Political Narratives in Pakistan

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### Abstract

The proliferation of digital media in Pakistan has fundamentally altered the architecture of political communication, shifting the primary terrain of narrative construction from state-regulated broadcast channels to decentralized, algorithmically driven social media platforms. This article examines the relationship between digital media and the transformation of political narratives in Pakistan, drawing on empirical evidence from the country's rapidly evolving digital landscape and on theoretical frameworks drawn from Habermas's public sphere theory, Castells's network power thesis, framing theory, and Gramscian hegemony. The article traces how digital platforms have enabled new forms of political mobilization, most visibly in the trajectory of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's digital resistance following 2022, while simultaneously documenting the Pakistani state's expanding regulatory and censorial apparatus, including successive amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, recurring platform bans, and internet shutdowns that cost the national economy an estimated \$1.62 billion in 2024 alone. The article concludes with policy recommendations directed at legislative reform, institutional independence of regulatory bodies, digital media literacy, and equitable access as preconditions for a more democratic digital public sphere in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Political Narratives, Pakistan, Social Media, Censorship, PECA, Political Mobilization, Public Sphere, Internet Shutdowns, Digital Governance

### Introduction

The last twenty years of electronic media expansion has built new frameworks for political communication worldwide. Pakistan is one of the most fascinating examples of these changes within the developing world. Traditionally, political communication systems in Pakistan used a small number of channels. These channels included state-operated media, a printed press that worked under a variety of formal and informal controls, and the informal networks of political party workers who transported news from the urban areas to the rural constituencies. While heterogeneous, these systems allowed political stability and, at times, the control of the public communications system for the political parties and the government. The control that the government and political parties had was lost. The digital systems have created new channels for political control, new expressions of domination, and new forms of control and manipulation of systems of public communications. The digital transformation of Pakistan has occurred rapidly and, in many ways, unexpectedly. By January

2024, the total number of internet users in the country was 111 million, representing an internet penetration rate of 45.7 percent. The total number of users of social media was 71.7 million, or 29.5 percent of the total population (DataReportal, 2024). The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority reported internet penetration had reached 56.51 percent in May 2024 compared to 53.81 percent the previous year (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, 2024). The digital indicators rate Pakistan as one of the most rapidly developing countries in South Asia, with the potential to significantly change Pakistan's political climate.

A society that recently heavily relied on television and newspapers for political knowledge is now, for the first time, experiencing a disjointed, algorithm-driven information distribution system where news, views, propaganda, and entertainment leap into each other without bounds. Given that the median age of Pakistan is 20.7, the largest voting age group has grown up using Smartphones and Social Media as the main resources for news and the means for political Socialization. The disruptive and sometimes unnerving changes this has caused have been visible and dramatic. The emergence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has invoked criticism for using pioneering digital campaigning, particularly between the mid-2000s and 2010s, by building a digital campaigning framework (Paracha, 2023). There has been a marked change in the digital presence of PTI. After Imran Khan was ousted via No Confidence in April 2022, PTI became a primarily digital resistance movement from Khan's 2022 No Confidence Movement. From that point on, other platforms such as Tik Tok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp were the main resources for digital campaigning, political resistance, and movement planning (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). The change from Khan's 2022 No Confidence Movement reflected a major change where Digital Media became the main source of Political Resistance for a considerable number of people in Pakistan.

It analyzes how political actors, like governments, civil and opposition movements, have responded to and tried to take advantage of digital communications. It includes the responses of various states to the perceived dangers of unrestricted digital discourse, including internet shutdowns, bans on specific platforms, and the implementation of more advanced and sophisticated laws to control the freedom of speech online. During the general elections of February 2024, the government undertook digital restrictions and suspended specific social media platforms on different occasions when the PTI was conducting virtual political gatharis (Freedom House, 2024). By the end of the coverage period, post restrictions on the platform Twitter had been in effect since mid-February 2024. These demonstrate that digital communication has become a real source of political power, which the government cannot control or take for granted. This paper aims to understand how digital media has impacted the construction of political narratives in Pakistan. It attempts to identify how digital media has changed social media outlets and how they have impacted the creation, dissemination, and opposition of political content. It posits that digital media in Pakistan has created new pathways and changed the structures of political communication. Digital media has made communication more decentralized and faster, allowing people to send more emotionally powerful and politically charged messages. These messages defy the censorship of mainstream media and control the state's narratives (Castells, 2013).

At the same time, this research places these events in a more extensive political power economy of digital control, focusing on how the architecture of the platforms, the regulation of the state, and the structural inequalities of digital access influence who can say what and with what impact. The five sections of this article concern: Digital media in Pakistan, the politics of media and political discourse, the mobilizing power of digital media, the politics of digital media; regulation, censorship, and politics, and the politics of digital communication. The article closes with a series of suggestions for establishing a digital public space in Pakistan that is more open and accountable and more plural in its offer (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024).

## **Digital Media Landscape in Pakistan: Growth and Penetration**

Over the last decade, the digital media landscape in Pakistan has shifted from providing peripheral information to an essential component of the social, economic, and political realities of daily life. There are several reasons behind this. There has been considerable growth in the diffusion of cost-effective smartphones, the proliferation of mobile broadband networks, and advancements in cellular technology and competitive telecommunications, decreasing data costs. Pakistan also has an increasingly young and urban population which increases their propensity to utilize digital communication and entertainment. Coupled with the aforementioned factors, there has been an accelerated shift to a media environment dominated by a digital communication infrastructure which is simultaneously connected globally, allowing rapid and extensive communications, as opposed to the previously limited print media and a few television channels (Hussain & Shabir, 2022).

The statistics show the scale of the changes. In early 2024, Pakistan had 111 million internet users and an internet penetration rate of 45.7 percent. Furthermore, 71.7 million users were active on social media, representing 29.5 percent of the total population. By May 2024, internet penetration had reached 56.51 percent, as reported by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, and was 53.81 percent a year earlier in the same month. Although these statistics are remarkable, they must be analyzed in conjunction with a demographic reality that enhances the statistics' political significance. Pakistan has a median population age of just over 20 years. Many Pakistani Citizens have come of age with social media as a part of their daily life. This has made political communication even more critical. With the rapid growth of social media and the increasing number of digital platforms, younger, more connected audiences demand different political messaging in a digital-first format compared to audiences that are reached with legacy media (DataReportal, 2024). Pakistan's digital landscape reveals significant insights because of its platform composition. As of July 2024, news showed Facebook reporting nearly 47.35 million users, Instagram reporting 17.30 million users (8.1% of the country's population), and TikTok gaining traction with respect to its demographic reporting 54.38 million users, all above the age of 18, which is nearly 38.9% of its adult population. By 2025, TikTok was reported to have 66.9 million adult users, and its platforms were used to target advertisements to 46.3% of Pakistan's adult population aged 18 and above. Meanwhile, YouTube has become significant for long-form video political content used by independent journalists. YouTube has also opened space for commentators and political actors that have been marginalized by the censorship of mainstream television. TikTok, YouTube and Facebook, and to some extent, WhatsApp, have become popular for different political content types. Facebook is popular for official party communications and mobilization of followers. Political content on TikTok is directed to younger audiences and is populist and emotional. YouTube has become independent media broadcasting, and WhatsApp is popular for localized political communications (Napoleon Cat, 2024). The digital networks that have been constructed are primarily underpinned by the infrastructural development of mobile connectivity. In Pakistan, an overwhelming 90% of internet traffic occurs via mobile phones, meaning for the majority of online Pakistanis, the mobile phone is the most significant site of political information. Digital connectivity also creates environment conditions that are selective towards specific types of political narratives. Political content that is engaging, emotionally charged, and easily digestible is favored over content that is lengthy, requires analysis, and involves sustained attention. This digital ecosystems logic has been utilized for political advantage within Pakistan by all ideological political players, and prefers dramatic political narratives over analytical policy discourse (Entman, 1993). The global expansion of digital accessibility has been rapid, but there are notable inequities in the digital space that have political consequences. Internet access inequity between urban and rural populations continues to be stark, with urban populations having both faster connections and more access than the majority of rural populations. Although the gender gap in mobile internet adoption has been closing, it is still significant. There were 8 million new

online women in 2024, meaning that the gender gap was reduced from 38% to 25% in one year. In 2024, mobile internet use increased among women to 45% from 33% in 2023. This was the largest recorded mobile internet use increase in the GSMA's gender gap report, and this new use was concentrated among rural women. Although these statistics signal improvements, they show that a large, economically disadvantaged, rural, and female population of Pakistan continues to be digitally excluded. This exclusion means that many women do not have access to digitally mediated political engagement. Social media's digitally mediated political engagement is made by listeners who have access. While Pakistan's digital public sphere is active, it is structurally inclusive of digital access inequities and therefore fails to represent the public of Pakistan (GSMA, 2024).

Pakistan's evolving digital media regulations creates additional challenges in describing Pakistan's digital landscape. The establishment and digital platforms have a relationship that involves a constant cycle of restrictions, negotiations, and incomplete releases. This cycle represents the challenges of controlling digital platforms while dealing with the delicate nature of digital communications. The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority blocked access to YouTube in 2012, along with around 20,000 websites. This ban was lifted in 2016 after the introduction of a localized YouTube version. TikTok was banned in 2020 for showing "immoral behavior." This ban lasted only 10 days after management promised to remove offending content. These restrictions on digital platforms do not eliminate discourse around digital politics. The government's willingness and ability to restrict digital platforms creates an environment of uncertainty for digital platform users. This environment influences the actions of digital content managers and the management of digital platforms (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, 2021; Freedom Network, 2024).

### **Theoretical Framework: Media, Power, and Political Narratives**

There is an immense need for a solid theoretical framework for the study of digital media and the transformation of political narratives. Among the many challenges to developing such a framework include the communication potential of digital platforms, the structural power relations elite within and among those platforms, the specific institutional and cultural settings of a country like Pakistan, and many more. There are a number of theories that address the aforementioned challenges. In the context of Pakistan, this paper applies a number of those theories on the complex and multidimensional relationship between media and political power, treating theory as a tool for analysis. Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere remains the most essential starting point for considerations of media and political communication. Habermas's theory is first introduced in his 1962 publication, translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The book is now considered a seminal text of both political theory and media studies. A public sphere, for Habermas, is a space of social life where individuals gather to become a public and discuss collectively, and where political power is subjected to the rational-critical scrutiny of a free press. The concept has a normative character for Habermas, as it asserts that the justification of politics should be based on public reason as opposed to the dictates of bureaucracy or the demands of the private economy. The emergence of the Internet was seen by many of its early proponents, and many others in the social and political sciences, as the means of delivering Habermas's inclusive and participatory public sphere, as forums, blogs, and social media provided citizens with the means to communicate and publish without the filters of broadcast media. In a similar vein, the proliferation of YouTube channels providing political commentary, citizen journalism on Twitter, and political organizing via WhatsApp, are examples of the democratizing potential of participatory political discourse that is not possible in a heavily regulated broadcast landscape (Habermas, 1989).

The Habermasian framework, rooted in the context of Western European bourgeois public life, needs considerable adaptation when applied to a society like Pakistan, where the ideal conditions of the public sphere (i.e., universal literacy, formal equality, freedom from state-imposed violence,

economic autonomy from political patrons, etc.) exist only partially. Habermas himself expressed substantial concern in his 2023 analysis of these issues. He argued that digital capitalism, the erosion of the boundary between the private and public spheres, the audience fragmentation caused by user communities, and the decline of the printed press have all aggravated the situation. His concerns are particularly relevant in Pakistan. There, social media has both enhanced the range of the public sphere and introduced new fragmentation, manipulation, and emotional overshoot mechanisms that are antithetical to rational deliberation. The Pakistani digital public sphere is characterized by a number of conflicting information ecosystems that are hostile to one another, emotionally and politically. These ecosystems are filled with the irrational circulation of disinformation, emotional framing, and politically motivated outrage. The Habermasian ideal then is a value standard that describes neither the existing state of affairs of the public sphere in Pakistan nor the existing conditions of digital communication. Rather, it is a value standard that aims to articulate the gross distortions of digital political communication in Pakistan (Habermas, 2023).

Manuel Castells provides an additional perspective that considers the structural aspects of communicative power. At the center of Castells' perspective is the notion that modern society is more and more organized around networks as opposed to hierarchies and bureaucracies. According to Castells, access to information networks is the key to understanding contemporary power relations. In *Communication Power*, Castells offers a new theory of power in the information age, based on the control of communication networks. He asserts that the power of contemporary societies is predicated on the control of information flows through communication networks. It is a power that is different, in a fundamental sense, from the economic and coercive power of earlier societies. When this theory is applied to Pakistan, it focuses on the different levels on which power over digital communication is exercised. These levels include the control of content on platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube the control of access and imposition of regulation by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, and the control of communication by political parties and movements through the use of digital technologies to promote their communication. Castells' theory is also useful in that it analyzes the concept of counter-power: the capability of subordinate groups to create alternative communication networks and challenge the dominant structures. The post-2022 digital mobilization of the PTI is a concrete example of counter-power in Pakistan's socio-political environment (Castells, 2013).

Framing theory is one of the three major perspectives that is built on the foundation of media and communication theory and is most popularly attributed to scholarship of Robert Entman and Erving Goffman. In communication, "framing" is the way in which reality is constructed through the use of selective emphasis and interpretation in order to arrive at a definition of a problem, a causal explanation, a moral judgement, and solution suggestions. Frames are produced and consumed by the public, media, and the political class. Within a particular media ecosystem, the competition for the production and control of major frames for politically disputed issues is a fundamental element of political communication. The major ways in which digital media has affected the art of framing include how rapidly frames are produced and exchanged, how numerous the producers and disseminators of frames have become, and how the social media frame amplifiers have an irrational, uncritical emotional responsiveness to the frames being produced. In Pakistan, the framing of Imran Khan's removal from office as a foreign conspiracy, framing electoral results as rigged, and framing the state's regulatory interferences as illegitimate censorship, are all examples of selective framing created through digital means and directed at public opinion for politically contested events (Entman, 1993). Lastly, regarding the relevance of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, although it was formulated several decades before the advent of the digital age, it still holds significance in terms of understanding media frameworks and the formation of political consent. For Gramsci, hegemony entails the ways in which the ruling classes are able to achieve and exercise their domination by

obtaining the willingly given consent of the subordinate classes to the social order by creating and legitimizing particular perspectives, beliefs, and systems of interpretation. From this point of view, the media are not simply channels through which information flows. They are systems of ideological reproduction, framing for citizens the ways of understanding their social and political reality. The digital media add interesting complexities to the Gramscian framework. Concentration of the ideological production means, as was the case with traditional media, meant control by state and corporate bodies. With digital media, the means of ideological production have been, to some extent, in the hands of the public, allowing for the rapid and widespread dissemination of counter-hegemonic discourses. However, the concentration of digital media systems, the volatile nature of digital media, state control, and structural inequalities of access, all reinforce that hegemony, rather than being eliminated, has been restructured and transformed. The Gramscian theory of hegemony and the Habermasian public sphere, the Castellsian network power, and framing theory are all used in this article to examine the changing political narratives in Pakistan in the digital age (Gramsci, 1971; Castells, 2013).

### **Digital Media as a Tool of Political Mobilization in Pakistan**

One important political change in Pakistan in the last 10 years is the replacement of supplemental communication tools with digital media that are the primary channels for political engagement. The change happened in phases with politically charged events that expressed the tools of digital media. Those were embraced by political actors who realized that the smartphone and social media feeds transformed the rules of the political game. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf story must be included in any reference to this transformation. Digital campaigning was first implemented by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, and its later marginalization by the conventional media was a clear indication of the extent to which digital media and social networks are the main channels of political communication in Pakistan. PTI has been utilizing digital media for more than a decade before it became nationally powerful. The mid-2000s saw PTI get its first political party website in Pakistan. This development earned PTI the "social media party" title and Imran Khan the "Facebook Khan" title. Digital politics were not serious to Pakistan's critics, populated by the military and political families, yet critics could not foresee that the demographic changes were supporting PTI the most. The group that was rapidly urbanizing, educated, and more digitally connected were the people that were most likely to support PTI. PTI used digital media to successfully spread its "Tabdeeli" (change) slogan to Pakistani social media. The 2018 general elections saw the digital mobilization be a vital part of PTI's voting strategy. It was used to supplement traditional campaigning, but not replace it. The party's social media system created a political communications blitz that was unmatched in Pakistan. PTI's anti-corruption messaging was emotionally resonant, and the sharing features of Facebook and Twitter helped mobilize a critical mass quickly and effectively (Paracha, 2023).

Imran Khan was removed from office in April 2022. This marked a new era in the importance of digital media in Pakistani politics. PTI transformed into only an online movement after April 2022. A large part of this movement occurred on TikTok, X, YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The social media movement became mostly volunteer developed and was path dependent upon Khan's political ousting. The shift in digital media was most needed against the backdrop of Khan's ousting and PTI's removal from the media sources. PTI was banned from showing Khan's speeches. He was also banned three times from all television. The only PTI friendly TV channel was ARY, and they were punished for showing Khan's speeches. Print news and television were useless for PTI, so they turned to digital media. PTI's social media volunteers were coordinated using WhatsApp and Twitter. This developed a far greater volume of media than any single organization was able to control or censor (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Imran Khan's arrest from the Islamabad High Court on May 9, 2023, showcased the state's commitment to counteraction against the mobilization capabilities

of digital media. The suspension of broadband at the behest of the Ministry of Interior on orders of the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, with the arrest occurring simultaneously with the detainment of Khan, resulted in government-imposed restrictions on access to the social media platforms of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The ban on internet services became a significant political commentary, with numerous services outage generating even more political support for the PTI and a greater perception of state intervention and overreach. Surfshark listed Pakistan among the top three states imposing Internet restrictions in the first half of 2023. Following Khan's arrest, Pakistan was responsible for three out of 42 Internet restrictions across the globe. The sequence of state-imposed Internet restrictions continued through the balance of 2023 and into 2024. PTI's online demonstrations and fundraising events were targeted at limited Internet access. The global Internet monitoring organization NetBlocks has stated this pattern is similar to tactics used in Venezuela to restrict opposition and protest activities (NetBlocks, 2023).

The February 2024 General Elections used digital media in a way previously untested in Pakistan. For PTI, the situation was bleak. Leadership was in prison, exiled, or both. The courts stripped away the party emblem. Candidates were forced to run as Independents and the mainstream media imposed a blackout on coverage of the party. Given the situation, PTI had no choice but to run a highly innovative campaign. PTI organized rallies on YouTube and TikTok and used AI voice-synthesis to bypass the imprisonment of the party leader and the ban on the media. Some of the media were banned from broadcasting the leader of the party. On February 9, after the elections were held and while the votes were being counted, Khan posted an AI-generated victory speech on the official PTI YouTube channel. The speech was generated in AI and Khan had sent notes to his lawyers from prison to deliver the speech. Contrary to the predictions of most political analysts, independent candidates from PTI won the most seats in the National Assembly. The strategic use of social media to access the young and urban electorate was a significant factor in their victory (Freedom House, 2024). Considering the importance of PTI's case, we must analyze the other aspects of digital political mobilization in Pakistan. Digital political mobilization has transformed the dynamics of political narrative. All political parties and movements in Pakistan have adjustable digital communication capacity. For example, both the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party mobilize digital communicative capacity to sustain political presence and support their particular narratives, i.e.: the former's political continuity and the latter's rural populism and democratic presence. Moreover, digital media has equipped various independent political voices, activists, civil society, and journalists, to develop digital communicative capacity to a level comparable to major media. These voices have assisted in popular the political realities that the traditional media have either avoided or censored. Although, this has augmented a more divisive and a more partisan political information atmosphere, it has shown the media's role in developing a democratic political system. Furthermore, a unique feature of digital media in Pakistan has been participation in the extreme and divisive media, via the forwarded WhatsApp message, YouTube Live, the viral video, and the hashtag. The significance of this diversified political communication is not yet fully appreciated and its sustained impact will radically influence democratic participation in the political process (Castells, 2013).

### **State, Censorship, and the Regulation of Digital Narratives**

The Pakistani state has historically never been a passive observer of digital media. With the popularization of the Internet into Pakistan, state institutions have worked to control, constrain, and where possible incorporate digital media's communication flow. These institutions have worked to create laws, regulations, and digital control technologies to manage the online speech and the users who optimize online resources. While the need to manage the online discourse and users has not changed, the systems that have been put in place over the last 10 years have been more refined and

more aggressive, and the political implications of the systems used have become more threatening. The state has fundamentally reorganized these systems of control in response to the media's use as the primary site for political conflict. Digital media systems that are used to manage and express political ideas have been reorganized to control and limit digital media's more obscene and blasphemous content. The state's systems of digital media control and management raise constitutional concerns with Pakistan's digital media systems regarding freedom of expression and the freedom to access information (Freedom Network, 2024).

The basis for Pakistan's regulation of digital content is rooted in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act of 2016, or PECA. PECA has almost exclusively operated as a legislative tool for the systematic curtailment of online expression. In its original form, PECA provided a mechanism for the criminalization of online activities such as hate speech, cyberstalking, and the unauthorized access of computer data. Unfortunately, as it stands today, the online provisions contained in PECA have been utilized as an instrument to censor freedom of expression well beyond what its provisions prescribe. In February of 2022, PECA was amended via an ordinance to make online defamation of the authorities, including of the military and Judiciary, a criminal offense with exacerbated punishments. Amnesty International has stated that this ordinance has placed citizens at an increased risk of criminalization for the mere act of opposing or making a statement against the government or the State of Pakistan. On the other hand, although the High Court of Pakistan has blocked this ordinance on the grounds of Freedom of Expression as being unconstitutional, the legislative framework continued its attack. In January of 2025, further amendments criminalized the dissemination of so-called "fake and false information" with a punishment of up to 3 years in prison. PECA also established 4 new enforcement agencies, including the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency and the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority, as well as the Social Media Protection Tribunals, all of which are under the control of the Federal Government and lack any form of oversight. The ambiguity of the provisions pertaining to false information drew widespread condemnation from journalists, civil society organizations, and international bodies advocating for press freedom, as it was argued that the law's lack of clarity would likely make almost all forms of critical commentary of a political nature liable to prosecution (Amnesty International, 2022; Digital Rights Foundation, 2025).

The actual implementation of this type of regulatory framework has resulted in a pattern of digital restrictions that have been consistently condemned around the world. The PTA claimed in 2024 that it had blocked over 1.4 million URLs since PECA was implemented in 2016, with 109,771 blocked in the 2023 to 2024 financial year alone, with the majority blocked for reasons of morality, national interest, and incitement of religious hatred, for which the law provides no clear definitions. This legal grayness is a deliberate tactic to afford authorities the discretion to focus on politically inconvenient content. Further, the opacity of the framework allows authorities to act in ways that effectively target politically inconvenient content while cloaking their actions in a rationales of morality or security that are virtually unchallengeable in a court of law. The reliance on political surveillance, and the use of recorded videos as a form of political control, has forced journalists into a position of self-censorship and greater control over their smartphone use. Perhaps the most notable instance of platform censorship in Pakistan's digital history occurred right after the general elections of February 2024 with the banning of X, previously known as Twitter. The forum, which was used by approximately 4.5 million people in Pakistan, was prohibited during the rule of the caretaker government around 10 days after the general elections. This was partially the result of a press conference by the former Rawalpindi commissioner, Liaquat Chattha, in which he accused the Chief Election Commissioner and the former Chief Justice of Pakistan of facilitating rigged elections. The Ban was justified by the Ministry of Interior stating X did not comply with regulations and did not remove accounts which were allegedly defaming the Chief Justice. One year later, with no signs of

the government lifting the ban, a PML-N leader admitted the ban was also enforced to control the social media of PTI. This statement was politically significant; it acknowledged the platform ban, and, irrespective of the stated reasons of regulation, was understood as controlling the political narrative, rather than a neutral content governance. The response of the State to those who circumvented the ban through the use of a virtual private network was equally revealing (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, 2024).

Due to VPN use increasing among individuals accessing platform X after the VPNs were banned in February 2024, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) proposed a plan to regulate the use of VPNs by mandating their registration. Additionally, the Council of Islamic Ideology declared that the use of VPNs is un-Islamic. This was a clear example of the use of VPNs for the expression of religious beliefs in the service of a political objective. Following the trend for the restriction of use of platforms in Pakistan, censorship is no longer used for the management of legally defined harmful acts. Aside from platform X, the restriction of use of Instagram occurred in May 2023, Facebook was restricted in July 2024, and Bluesky was restricted in November 2024. Bluesky was restricted after gaining popularity, and WhatsApp was restricted between November 23 and 24, 2024, to predict and restrict use for potential anti-government protests. The restriction of platforms is occurring so frequently in relation to politically important events such as electoral processes, anti-government protests, or events convened by the opposition, that it is clearly deliberate. International organizations that advocate for an open and free Internet have called for an end to the restrictions on platform X, and for repeals of Section 37 of Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). This will decrease the censorship of the Internet. X has been restricted in Pakistan due to the decisions made by the PTA. Due to the current regulations in place, independent reporter Asad Ali Toor was detained in February 2024 by the Federal Investigation Agency and was prohibited from his defense attorney being present during the questioning (NetBlocks, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Digital governance in Pakistan seems to show a lack of institutional transparency, inconsistent enforcement, and prioritization of political requirements over digital rights. Although the laws are broad enough to cover almost all online criticism of politics in Pakistan, the laws are applied in such an inconsistent manner that it almost seems to reinforce the notion that legal enforcement is more about politics than legal principals. As a result, the impact on the public is significant. Knowing that political discourse could potentially lead to criminal acts, the imposition of some shores, and continuous monitoring, many Pakistanis digitally censor themselves in a manner that goes unreported in circulation. The government is more comfortable reinforcing a narrative by indirect censorship than direct censorship. There is intentional confusion encompassing censorship where everyone is uncertain about the legal limitations of digital discourse. The safest route to take is to maintain silence (Freedom House, 2024).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The previous examination analyzed five related areas that incorporate digital media in Pakistan and how they have reshaped political narratives. These include the penetration of digital networks, the most compatible media and politics models, the role of digital platforms and the new politically driven digital mobilization, and the regulatory and censorship-related measures of the state to control the politically challenging situation of unregulated digital dialogues. In unison, these areas collectively demonstrate that Pakistan occupies a unique position in the world because it has a deeply conflicting situation between the liberating possibilities of digital communication for democracy and the authoritarian impulses of historically dominant controlling institutions over public discourse. Nevertheless, this situation exists in other countries as well. What makes Pakistan unique compared to its peers, is the great degree of intensity this situation has been demonstrated, the rapid dislocation of digital platforms from the periphery to the critical focus of political discourse, and the great level

of the state's reaction that has revealed the structural contradictions of a political space that claims democracy, while systematically undermining the communicative possibilities of democratic discourse (Freedom House, 2024).

The most apparent conclusion from this study is that digital media in Pakistan has transformed the logics regarding the construction of political narratives in ways that are both empowering and precarious. On the one hand, this has enabled the articulation of political voices that had previously been marginalized, and large scale decentralized structures and new forms of accountability, enabling official narratives to be contested in the realm of the digital. The evolution of PTI's digital politics from the early use of Facebook to politically mobilize the youth and to the party's success in the 2024 elections, where they won the most seats in the National Assembly, despite the highest level of institutional barriers, shows the extent to which the digital realm has changed the politics of engagement with the electorate in Pakistan. Digital media has also contributed to the rapid fragmentation of the politically psyche, the swift spread of disinformation, new forms of accountability for state institutions, and the politics of the digital media, where it is increasingly difficult to draw the line between political communication and state propaganda. The overall effect of these competing forces is a political public space that, for Pakistan, is unprecedented and is both more open and more precarious. The financial impact of Pakistan's digital governance policies shows the price of seeing digital platforms as threats needing to be managed instead of seeing them as infrastructure that needs development and protection. We can see the cost of this perspective with Pakistan's record setting financial losses in 2024 due to internet and social media blackout, putting the cost at \$1.62 billion. This was even worse than the losses in countries with ongoing conflicts like Sudan and Myanmar, which had 18 cases of internet disruption with a combined total of 9,735 hours and an affected user base of 82.9 million. The blockade of X, which has not been operational in Pakistan since February 2024, accounted for approximately \$1.34 billion, while users tried to get past the blockade with VPNs, which had an estimated 6,000 % increase. Pakistan's freelance IT workers, numbering 2.37 million and whose livelihood depends on them being able to access the internet to work with foreign customers, are the biggest losers with this policy. This outcome is particularly devastating for a country whose aim is to focus the IT sector on export growth. With these statistics, it is easy to see that the benefits of digital censorship for Pakistan's politicians are minimal with the additional cost that digital censorship imposes (Top10VPN, 2024; Pakistan Software Houses Association, 2024).

This article provides detailed analysis alongside a series of recommendations for building a digitally governed framework in Pakistan, which balances democratic governance and streams of economic growth and development. Recommendations are made to the Government of Pakistan, civil society, platform companies in Pakistan and members of the international community. The most pressing need for Parliament is the wholesale amendment of the PECA to ensure it is aligned with international human rights law. The civil society has called upon the repeal of PECA, and particularly Section 37, due to its provisions of censorship and violation of the constitutional rights to freedom of speech and freedom to access information as enshrined in the Article 19 and Article 19-A, respectively. The January 2025 amendments criminalize the vague notions of "false" and "fake" information" and the creation of unregulated, Government-controlled, bodies, move in the opposite direction. Laws should restrict the limited legitimate interests in removing online content, maintain judicial oversight in removing online content, and allow individuals and organizations redress for violations of their digital rights. The current practice of vague and ambiguous legal provisions, designed to facilitate politically motivated enforcement actions, should be replaced with provisions that enhance legal certainty and establish a framework for transparent, accountable regulatory actions (Digital Rights Foundation, 2025; Amnesty International, 2022).

Significant economic, reputational, and constitutional consequences follow the blanket of

fundamental rights Internet shutdowns and digital Platform Bans. As such, these should be deployed extremely cautiously and with proper legal safeguards. The framework currently allows the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to block the Internet on the internal ministry's direction without a judicial order or without a post-action accountability mechanism. This framework is inconsistent with the constitutional rights of Pakistan and the country's international human rights law obligations. Moreover, Internet access or specific Platform bans should only be permitted with a justified order issued by a court of law. This order should specify a time limit, be subject to periodic mandatory reviews, and include a public accountability mechanism. There is irrefutable evidence of the correlation of Internet access bans and the disruption of political activities. This makes the current system a mechanism to limit political activities. To develop a more independent Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) from executive control, a basic overhaul of PTA's structure is essential. Currently, PTA's function aligns more with a branch of government policy rather than a neutral regulator with the public interest at heart. PTA now lacks both the transparency and accountability typical of independent regulators in the processes of removing content and restricting access to platforms. To maintain the insulation of a regulator from politically driven directives, an independent, flexible framework for regulating digital communications should require the regulator to articulate its decisions in detail, cite the applicable law justifying the restriction of content, and design mechanisms to facilitate appeals from persons affected by the decision. PTA is not the only entity with obligations. Companies providing platforms in Pakistan should challenge legally questionable blocking orders, provide detailed accountability statements for government content removal orders, and develop context-specific moderation policies for Pakistan while actively engaging with civil society and independent scholars. These companies should be liberal in sharing content moderation policies. This is a better practice than relying solely on government compliance. They should also publish substantive transparency reports (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, 2024).

Digital media literacy needs to be viewed as an essential public interest deserving long-term policy engagement and funding. In Pakistan, the fast growth of digital access has not been matched by the growth of citizens' critical skills, which are needed to navigate a confusing and often distorted information landscape. Media literacy programs in schools and community settings, funding independent fact-checkers, and creating public tools for detection of false information would make for a stronger, resilient digital citizenry. Organizations such as Digital Rights Foundation, Media Matters for Democracy, and Bolo Bhi are leaders in the efforts that need institutional, financial, and regulatory support, in contrast to the patronage and intermittent harassment they have, at times faced (Media Matters for Democracy, 2024). The issues of uneven digital access outlined in this article require a continued focused policy response. These issues include the gendered dimension of mobile internet access in Pakistan, the difference in connectivity between urban and rural areas, and the exclusion of the economically marginalized from the digital public sphere. These are not problems that can be resolved solely through infrastructure investment. They are political problems with real implications for the active participants in the digital political discourse. In order to create a truly democratic digital future in Pakistan, there must be a dedication to high-speed internet as a public good and the associated rights to communication. Otherwise, the potential for transformative change that digital media offer will continue to be monopolized by an elite few, while the promise of democracy in the digital age will remain unfulfilled for the overwhelming majority of citizens in Pakistan (GSMA, 2024).

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