
Weaponized Synthetic Media: AI-Generated Disinformation, Deepfakes, and Electoral Integrity in Pakistan's 2024 General Election

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Abstract

This article examines the role of artificial intelligence generated disinformation, deepfakes, and bot amplified narratives in shaping electoral discourse during Pakistan's 2024 general election. Drawing on secondary sources, news reporting, and existing scholarship, the study documents a striking pattern in which the imprisoned Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf leader Imran Khan's party used disclosed AI generated video and audio to mobilize supporters, while unidentified actors simultaneously deployed fabricated deepfake audio and video falsely attributed to Khan and his associates to suppress voter turnout through false boycott calls. The analysis situates these findings within computational propaganda theory, the concept of epistemic security, and institutionalist approaches to regulatory capacity, arguing that Pakistan's weak legal framework and its decision to suspend internet and mobile services on election day compounded the harms of synthetic disinformation. The study finds that Pakistan currently lacks any regulatory mechanism specifically addressing AI generated political content, relying instead on ill suited defamation law. It concludes with policy recommendations for the Election Commission of Pakistan, legislative reform, and civil society collaboration to safeguard electoral integrity against future AI driven manipulation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Deepfakes, Disinformation, Electoral Integrity, Pakistan, Computational Propaganda, Democracy

1. Introduction

The extensive incorporation of artificial intelligence within the domain of political communication has catapulted novel challenges with respect to the democratic process and the integrity of elections worldwide. Perhaps the most important of these challenges may be the use of generated media (deepfakes), alongside AI voice generation and the use of automated bots to provide convincing, yet entirely false, representations of political actors (Woolley & Howard, 2018). In the recent past, the substantial principal and technical resources required to produce convincing political forgeries limited the scope of the technology to legitimate uses. The challenge to the legitimate use of the technology and the subsequent disinformation campaigns has taken on an unprecedented form. In a highly unusual and simultaneous series of major elections, including the United States, India, European Union, Russia, Taiwan and Pakistan, scheduled for 2024, many election observers and scholars have noted a critical period and unprecedented stress on the democratic system of the world. The general elections in Pakistan scheduled for February 8, 2024, provide a unique case study of a

developing nation with a precarious overall national situation in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated content can be examined in conjunction with elections and politics. These elections are being held under exceptional circumstances. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan was convicted of corruption-related charges and was sent to multiple prisons, including a conviction handed down a few days before the elections. For the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, in these circumstances of extreme political oppression, AI-generated videos and voice technologies were used to make Khan, who was in prison, address supporters, conduct vote soliciting activities, and provide a speech to claim a victory, while he remained in prison (Ray, 2023). The AI use was made known to the public, and the technology aided a political mobilization effort to give a public voice to a leader who was made to be silent in the elections, and who, in effect, was made to withdraw from the elections completely.

Pakistan's elections encountered a very different category of AI-generated content, this time designed to mislead and suppress voters, rather than amplify political voices. Anti-voter AI-generated content appeared across social media platforms on the day before the elections, including a fake audio recording of Imran Khan calling for a complete election boycott, directly opposing the goal of Khan's party to get the maximum election turnout (Aizhu, 2024). Panjutha is also the subject of a deep fake video, and is the legal advisor to Khan, and is seen in the video calling on PTI supporters to not vote, even though Panjutha did not make such a statement. During the same time period, several other manipulated content creations targeted certain individual candidates. The election day, along with the nation-wide Internet and mobile network interruptions, implemented by the Pakistani authorities under the pretext of security, prevented journalists and fact checkers from addressing the false narratives. This left the approximately 128 million eligible voters of Pakistan uninformed and vulnerable to the many unsubstantiated and manipulated content without the means to self-verify. The co-occurrence of legally sanctioned and covert uses of AI-generated content within the same electoral cycle presents an entirely unique analytical challenge that existing AI, disinformation, and electoral integrity scholarship is unable to tackle. Existing scholarship on AI and elections, particularly that derived from U.S. and European contexts, tends to view synthetic media as primarily a deceit and manipulation tool. The Pakistani context makes that analysis even more complicated, as within the same context the same technology was used as an instrument of democratic expression for a politically marginalized leader and was also used as an instrument of electoral sabotage against the leader's own political party. The same technology expressed both sides, making the case particularly challenging for existing frameworks. This context presents both a scholarly and pragmatic challenge to existing frameworks of electoral integrity and regulation of media and democracy with regard to the permissible and impermissible uses of AI in political contextual communication. This is particularly true in contexts where the state and its agencies may have an interest in restricting political competition.

This article analyzes the impact of AI-driven disinformation, deepfakes, and bot-supported narratives on the perception of voters and the discourse at the polls during Pakistan's 2024 general election. As part of this analysis, the article has the following three goals. The first is to identify and differentiate the diverse AI-generated political content that appeared during the election, differentiating between the content that mobilizes voters and the content that misleads voters, even though the underlying technology stays the same (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The second goal is to analyze how the relevant Pakistani authorities, especially the Election Commission of Pakistan, and the telecom regulators, responded to the escalating situation of politically motivated synthetic content. The third goal is to describe the situation in Pakistan and the case example of other countries in relation to theories of the integrity of elections, manipulation of public opinion and the inadequacy of current legislation, and the morality and ethics of artificial intelligence in the context of disinformation. Overall, this article aims to expand the limited amount of research on artificial intelligence and the governance of

democracy in the Global South, especially the areas that have been relatively under researched in the academic world, even though they have some of the largest institutional gaps and challenges in regards to this emerging technology.

2. Literature Review

Over the past ten years, scholarship examining the intersection of artificial intelligence and electoral integrity has increased as an offshoot from research on digital disinformation, social media manipulation, and computational propaganda. Some of the first research on the social media manipulation heuristic was done by Woolley and Howard, and identified the use of social media tools to influence public sentiment using automated systems and sophisticated data analysis (Woolley & Howard, 2018). This research described the use of social media bots and coordinated campaigns to create inauthentic social media systems to influence the outcome of elections well before the use of generative AI became widely available. The research in this chapter has laid the conceptual frameworks for the various ways that automated systems could be used to influence the democratic process. The primary focus of this early scholarship was on amplifying and increasing the visibility of false information. The scope of scholarship shifts with the evolution of generative AI; this scholarship focuses on the ability of systems to create and influence the public with digitally manipulated video and audio content.

The specific national security and democratic implications of deepfakes were first studied by Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron when they focused their attention on deepfakes, following the initial broad interest in the implications of deepfake technology (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Chesney and Citron grounded their arguments in the idea that deepfakes create a greater threat in the deepfakes construct world than traditional forms of fakes. This is especially relevant because deepfakes can essentially create falsified audiovisual evidence of events that did not occur. Furthermore, they exploit the psychological tendency of humans to believe what they see and hear. With their arguments, this body of work proposed the idea of a liar's dividend. This refers to the erosion of public trust in verifying evidence because of the existence of deepfake technology that can be used to consider authentic evidence to be fake. This body of work is especially relevant to the Pakistani situation. In this context, Chaudhry's assertion that deepfake technology successfully produced a deepfake of Imran Khan's voice to manipulate voters illustrates the dangers of failing to recognize the deepfake's political implications.

An increasingly significant parallel current of literature has analyzed digital technology and democratic slippage linkages, especially in hybrid and developing democracies. Larry Diamond's earliest work on liberation technology, which appreciated the potential of digital tools in creating democracy, has been modified significantly by Diamond's contemporaries, who cited the increasing use of digital technology for surveillance, censorship, and tools of manipulations by state and non-state organizations (Diamond, 2010). This change of focus is especially relevant to the South Asian and Global South contexts, where the combination of weak regulatory capacity, a politicized media environment, and fraught civil-military relations substantively add to the challenges of untamed technology. Joshua Tucker and others, in their writings on social media and democracy, have also warned against the assumption that a digital technology is either a positive democratizing or a negative democratizing force. They emphasize that technology's impact is overwhelmingly determined by the context of the system and the politics within which it is deployed. This has gotten a lot of traction with the AI technology's deceptive use and its mobilizing potential that have been documented during the 2024 election in Pakistan.

Since 2023, literature on AI and disinformation (especially in relation to election case studies) has experienced an exponential increase. However, much of this literature continues to analyze case studies within the borders of established Western democracies, as well as in high-profile Asian

elections. The 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections have become a critical case study in this literature due to the presentation of a manipulated audio file of a candidate addressing vote manipulation only 48 hours before the election, thus preventing any fact-checking (Meaker, 2023). This has been cited as the strongest example in academic literature of the likely use of AI-generated content to influence the outcome of a competitive election. Similar studies on the 2024 Indian general elections have documented the proliferation of AI-generated content, including digitally resurrecting a deceased political leader to deliver a campaign message, thus pushing the boundaries of ethics in a posthumous campaign. Research on Taiwan's 2024 elections has focused on the involvement of other countries, particularly Chinese state actor AI disinformation content, which will serve as an important contrast to other case studies on the intent and purpose of disinformation campaigns in an election.

Although there is a dearth of academic and policy literature focusing on Pakistan's information environment, media researchers and civil society organizations have begun to publish on the issue. Media Matters for Democracy and the Free and Fair Election Network, among others, have published research and monitoring reports on digital disinformation in the context of elections in Pakistan (Khan, 2024). However, these reports and research do not tend to be situated within the broader debates of comparative politics and communication studies. Research on the media politics of Pakistan tends to focus on state censorship, the political economy of broadcast media, and press freedom, while the study of the role of AI technologies and the production of digital media in Pakistan's elections has received scant attention. Pakistan represents a unique case in the context of a digitally connected population and PTI's (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) social media operations, as well as the government's historically restrictive policies toward disallowing manifestations of political opposition. Thus, the lack of attention on the subject is a considerable oversight.

The current literature provides foundational constructs for the current study and identifies a substantive problem area that this study intends to address. First, the literature offers a solid framework for understanding how the mechanics of computational propaganda and the psychological and epistemic threats of synthetic media interact with the institutional context and the political ramifications of technology (Tucker et al., 2017). Second, the current literature offers a framework for understanding the diversity of context and the political implications of technology. At the same time, the literature is largely silent about how generative AI is used by a single political actor for legitimate purposes of political mobilization, while at the same time being used by other unknown agents for deceptive purposes of impersonation. The case of Pakistan illustrates this problem. The current literature is equally silent on how the interplay of weak regulatory frameworks and the Internet Shutdown Policy on the part of the State in developing democracies, combine with the challenges posed by generative AI, makes the problem of AI-authorized disinformation even worse. The aim of this study is to bridge this gap through a robust empirical and theoretical analysis of the 2024 case of Pakistan.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three interrelated theories serve as the basis for analyzing the trends that took place in Pakistan's general election of 2024. These theories include the theory of computational propaganda, epistemic security in the context of democratic theory, and the theories of regulatory and institutional capacity in developing democracies. Each of these theories examines the problem from a different view. Their combination, however, allows for the study of the problem in greater depth than any single theory would. Woolley and Howard, and scholars of the Oxford Internet Institute, argue that the automated and algorithmic talk of digital signal amplification and social political communication should be considered a structural feature of digital signal communication, and not a temporary case or an exception (Woolley & Howard, 2018). This theory is the most appropriate for the case of the 2024 Pakistani elections, where automated and coordinated social media activities played a documented

role in the amplification of AI-generated boycott messages attributed to Imran Khan and Naeem Haider Panjutha, as well as unrelated false content that went viral, including the fabricated evidence of international soccer players involvement in the voting.

The second theoretical anchor, epistemic security, centers on more recent developments within democratic theory and refers to the problems posed by synthetic media concerning the informational building blocks of democratic deliberation. Epistemic security is concerned with the loss of a society's shared ability to distinguish true from false on a systemic level. It moves beyond earlier concerns of media literacy and the capacity to engage in systematic fact-checking. Chesney and Citron's liar's dividend is one of the main concepts in this area (Chesney & Citron, 2019). It maintains that the capability of creating a completely convincing fabrication of the media leads to a loss of trust in all media. The trust of the media is especially significant in the context of Pakistan. In this instance, PTI's own open and disclosed use of AI-produced video to enable Imran Khan to speak to his supporters from within the prison, and which the party termed as AI, coexisted to produce deepfake audio, which was falsely attributed to the same leader. In this case, the legituses of synthetic communications and evil uses of impersonation, which were directed to the same political leader, created a new epistemic environment that was almost impossible for the ordinary voter to resolve, and which the existing theories that focused on the deceptive use of AI simply cannot address.

The third component of my working theory addresses how scholarship on institutionalism concerning regulatory capacity and state response to technological challenges (especially in the context of hybrid and evolving democracies) informs my analysis (Diamond, 2010). Associated with the analysis of the relationship between weak institutions and the vulnerability of democracy, this theory posits that a state's response to the challenge posed by novel AI-generated disinformation would depend on the preexisting institutional framework concerning regulation, enforcement, and the political neutrality of the electoral management body. In the context of Pakistan, this theory focuses on the institutional capacity and independence of the Electoral Commission of Pakistan, the regulatory uncertainty of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act in the context of AI, and the preference shown by the state for the use of severe and indiscriminate measures, such as countrywide Internet shutdowns, as opposed to the more refined and targeted regulation of disorder caused by the uncontrolled flow of information. This theory is important to understand why there was an ad hoc and reactive approach to the AI-generated disinformation during the 2024 elections, lacking any preexisting regulatory framework to address synthetic political content.

Layered analysis of these three frameworks begins with the mechanics of content amplification, then pivots to the epistemic impacts of the amplification on voters, and finally to the legal and institutional framework of the state's response (Tucker et al., 2017). This construction is purposefully aligned with the central empirical enigma of this article. This enigma involves the segmented legal and illegal (deceptive) uses of the same underlying AI technology during a single election cycle. This juxtaposition necessitates the simultaneous consideration of the mechanics of technology, epistemic effects, and the context of institutions. The next section of this article uses the integrated framework in a thorough empirical analysis of the case of Pakistan.

4. AI-Generated Disinformation in Pakistan's 2024 General Election: A Case Analysis

The February 8, 2024 general election in Pakistan occurred amidst a highly inflamed political atmosphere because of the ongoing imprisonment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and the systemic legal and administrative harassment of Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Khan was barred from running in the election due to his conviction for corruption, and in the days leading up to the election, he was sentenced to other convictions, one of which was handed down on January 31, just over a week before election day. The supporters of PTI believed that these sentences were part of a systematic and intentional campaign of pre-electoral rigging, and the IA-Generated

Disinformation campaign became a prominent and substantial source of the narrative in the weeks leading up to the elections (Blackbird.AI, 2024). It was in this environment of political repression and a domination of the narrative in social media that IA-generated Disinformation became an important element in the campaign of the PTI, as well as a tool used by unidentified actors to adversely impact the electoral campaign of the PTI.

The most notable case of campaign use of AI in politically charged communication in Pakistan is the use of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's campaign to enable the imprisoned Imran Khan to speak to a virtual campaign rally using synthetic audio and video technologies. The approximately four minute long clip used an AI voice that closely resembled Khan's voice and an AI video that showed Khan virtually sitting at a desk with the Pakistani flag behind him and encouraging his supporters to show up and vote. The video also carried an explicit statement that the voice was synthesized, the absence of AI in most campaign communications makes this an instance of rare transparent AI disclosure (Ray, 2023). Digital rights advocate Nighat Dad, at the time of the presentation, noted that even in the presence of such a statement, for the average voter, there can be no certainty whether the underlying message (in this case, the call to vote) was Khan's or was constructed by the PTI's social media team, creating an important challenge to the disclosure-based approach in the context of synthetic political communications. This approach was used in the absence of the Khan's physical presence to message his victory with the consent of Imran Khan to the AI video creation.

In contrast with the sanctioned use of AI technology for positive means, a more troubling pattern of artificial content synthesized deceptively began appearing, and this time, rather than attempting to mobilize PTI's support, it aimed to suppress it. Less than 24 hours prior to the polls opening on February 7, social media started to carry a fabricated audio message of Imran Khan purporting to instigate a call for a total boycott of the elections (Incident Database, 2024). This signaled a one hundred and eighty degree shift in the PTI message, which was to encourage all supporters to vote and, in general, to maximize voter turnout. This, of course, would sabotage PTI's performance in the elections at a time which was critical, as it was the last moment before polling for them to go and rectify or correct the message. Closely related, and at the same time, a Deepfake video of Naeem Haider Panjutha appeared, who is a legal counsel wished to and associated with Khan's legal team. This video urged the supporters of the PTI to also refrain from voting, which, of course, he never authorized or gave. The almost simultaneous appearance of these fabricated messages on the boycott of voting, attributed to the officials of PTI's leadership, suggests the coordinated nature of disinformation targeting the electoral turnout of PTI.

In addition to these two cases, information manipulation and other fabrication techniques in the election's information ecosystem further muddled the situation. Although such instances did not always use advanced deepfake technologies, they contributed to a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust. One deepfake created the false narrative that certain football players, including greats such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar Jr., Kylian Mbappe, and Lionel Messi, voted in the Pakistani elections (Blackbird.AI, 2024). This narrative was copied and shared by many in the public. Another incident included an edited video that "faked" Rana Atif, then an independent PTI candidate, joining the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party, and as a result, Atif was forced to post a video message to assert he would not join another party. This period was also marked by complaints of vote counting rigging, and one claim alleged a commissioner in Layyah ordered his subordinate deputy commissioner to alter the local election results. The commissioner issued a video message to the contrary.

The important context that affected significant developments was the state action that changed the nature of how journalists, fact-checkers, and citizens were able to verify or contest false information in real time. On the day of the election, the Pakistani government ordered an internet and mobile

services shutdown across the country. The Interior Ministry justified the service shut down due to two bomb blast attacks on election offices in Balochistan which killed over thirty Balochistani and created a security threat for the bordering countries of Iran and Afghanistan (Global Voices, 2024). Regardless, the security rationale for the service shut down restricted Pakistan's circa 128 million voters from obtaining verified information to counter the false deep fake boycott calls and other fabricated content that was circulating. Journalists covering the election noted that an influx of unverified AI content combined with internet restrictions made real time coverage of the elections highly difficult. One journalist in Islamabad noted that unverified AI content of Khan made a significant impact on PTI candidates and Khan's content of unverified AI related to Khan's request to vote made a strong impact on PTI candidates, showing a large voter turnout.

The Free and Fair Election Network, an influential Pakistani election monitoring-focused civil society organization, provided an essential institutional perspective on these changes. A spokesperson indicated that the comprehensive repercussions of social media on Pakistani elections were continuing and that monitoring social media remained a work in progress, made all the more difficult by the challenges posed by artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies (VOA News, 2024). This comment identifies an important analytical gap in the general Pakistani case, that both local and foreign election monitoring agencies do not have systematic techniques for observing and assessing the impact of artificial intelligence in real-time electoral situations, as opposed to the techniques they do have for observing and assessing traditional election monitoring malpractices, like ballot stuffing or voter coercion, in a comparative context. The Pakistani case shows the considerable negative impacts of disinformation generated by artificial intelligence, but also shows the considerable gap in the ability of governmental and non-governmental monitoring systems to respond to the impact of disinformation generated by artificial intelligence on the electoral system.

5. Institutional and Regulatory Responses to AI-Driven Electoral Disinformation

During the 2024 general elections, Pakistan's institutions offered little to no response to the use of AI-generated disinformation, and subsequently, there was no attempt to create a regulatory framework to mitigate the impact of synthesized political disinformation. In the aftermath of the elections, this was a major concern for legal professionals and civil society. For example, Media Matters for Democracy stated that the current legal framework in Pakistan was clearly not designed to address this concern, and pointed out that there was no specific provision in the law to address AI-generated content and that those affected by the AI technology should be allowed to pursue lawsuits for the violations that AI technology has created (VOA News, 2024). In the absence of appropriate legal frameworks, such lawsuits would most likely be pursued through general defamation lawsuits, a significant regulatory gap, since defamation law is not equipped to address the specific and direct impacts of synthesized media that result in a broad erosion of trust in the integrity of all political communications.

The Election Commission of Pakistan had a similarly narrow response to the wave of AI-generated disinformation. The Commission avoided the press inquiries related to the deepfake boycott calls. Instead, they directed the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority to make sure that the broadcast media followed the national media code of conduct. This addressed the content of traditional media, but the more impactful problem of AI-generated content on social media platforms was largely ignored.

Generally speaking, the most significant step taken by Pakistani authorities concerning the information environment around the elections was not a response to AI by authorities. Rather, it was the decision to cut internet and mobile services across Pakistan on the day of elections. This decision was made even though the Sindh High Court ordered the federal caretaker government and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to provide continuous internet services until February 8

(Global Voices, 2024). This was after an independent political candidate filed a case against the government because he believed that the frequent suspension of internet services during the campaign was a violation of the constitutional rights. The shutdown sparked immediate protest from various members of the political community. Former senator Sherry Rehman filed a formal complaint regarding the mobile network suspension to the Election Commission of Pakistan, while Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party, demanded the immediate restoration of mobile services and instructed his party to take the matter up with the Commission and the courts. Human rights organizations also condemned this action. Amnesty International called the suspension of mobile internet services a blunt attack on the rights to freedom of expression and to assembly. Access Now and the Committee to Protect Journalists also called on all mobile and internet services to be restored during and after the polling.

The shutdown was justified by the Interior Ministry, owing to the prior day's suicide bomb attacks against election offices in Balochistan. However, the relevant decision hindered both journalists and fact-checking agencies from addressing the phony boycott messages at the time when the need for accurate information was the most. Pakistan's lack of a cohesive regulatory response on the use of AI during the 2024 general elections sharply contrasts emerging international attempts to regulate the use of AI-generated electoral content that coincided with the same elections. A comparative study of the 2024 elections' generative AI conduct regulations found that several jurisdictions, including the European Union and Norway, created, or are in the process of creating, voluntary or mandatory regulations to govern the use of deepfakes and digital disinformation in the election process (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Norway's approach has been a joint statement signed by all nine parliamentary parties, wherein the parties commit to not creating or disseminating misleading AI content. Although such conduct regulations generally do not create mechanisms for the imposition of sanctions, they are an institutional response to the challenges posed by the use of generative AI in the election process. Such an institutional response was lacking in Pakistan in 2024. The absence of regulations in the use of generative AI to create disinformation, deepfakes, and coercive misinformation in the 2024 elections has been the focus of most of the scholarly work on the subject. The scholarship has called for a multi-stakeholder engagement to address the use of generative AI in elections by creating guidelines by the Elections Commission of Pakistan, regulating the use of mal declarative deepfakes by enhancing data protection and criminal law, and an institution-based voluntary code of conduct.

Civil society organizations in Pakistan have increasingly urged the Election Commission to become more active in addressing this issue, and researchers associated with the Digital Rights Foundation have suggested that the Election Commission should start to work directly with tech-related nonprofits dealing with disinformation and related topics (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). They have argued that this type of engagement would significantly enhance the Commission's ability to address the challenge of AI-based disinformation in the context of future elections. The absence of this type of collaboration has meant that the burden of finding and removing AI-based disinformation for the 2024 elections has largely fallen on independent fact checkers, journalists, and digital rights organizations, which are working with very limited resources and, during the most critical time within the election period, have had no reliable access to the internet to allow them to post the information they seek to correct. This pattern of civil society actors working under extreme constraints to counter disinformation and the state remains largely passive demonstrates the main point about the impact of AI technology. In this context, Pakistan's situation with the use of AI technology in 2024 should be viewed as more than simply a technology issue. Rather, it illustrates a situation with regard to significantly underdeveloped systems and regulations that generative AI has exposed, so that it should be viewed as an amplification and exposure of the preexisting situation.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The implications of AI disinformation, deepfakes, and bot-driven narratives for the 2024 General Elections of Pakistan offer useful insights for the study of AI and its intersection with democracy globally. The primary focus of the study is that within the same electoral cycle, the same foundation of generative AI technology served two contradictory purposes within the same country – one served as the technology of democratic engagement for a political leader who is currently imprisoned and silenced, while the other served as the technology of electoral disruption employed by the unknown constituents against the same political party (Meaker, 2023). The primary focus of this study is that within the same electoral cycle, the same foundation of generative AI technology served two contradictory purposes within the same country – one served as the technology of democratic engagement for a political leader who is currently imprisoned and silenced, while the other served as the technology of electoral disruption employed by the unknown constituents against the same political party. As is the case with many other typical examples of AI-generated electoral disinformation, including the Slovak elections of 2023, where the outputs of AI technology were largely deceptive, the case of Pakistan is unique. The PTI, which used AI-generated videos to show Imran Khan addressing his supporters from prison, along with a fake deepfake audio recording that was incorrectly attributed to Khan, called for a boycott of the elections.

This analysis continues to show how the response to AI-driven disinformation in Pakistan is difficult to understand without the country's institutions and politics. The fake boycott messages that were sent just before a polling period (with no time to retract them) were sent during an information blackout (Internet and mobile communication) that the government justified on security grounds, although NGOs and International Human Rights Organizations considered it a severe limitation on basic human rights (Global Voices, 2024). The combination of advanced forms of disinformation and severe limits on the information infrastructure means that at the most critical moments of an election, Pakistan's roughly 128 million eligible voters could not meaningfully verify or respond to the disinformation. This strongly supports the empirical cases of the institutionalism theory presented in this article. It demonstrates that the degree to which a state has the ability, and is willing, to take a blunt rather than targeted approach to deal with information disorder, and the degree to which it is independent from the pressures of partisan politics, has a significant effect on the impact of AI disinformation on election results and the public's perception of trust.

This study's most notable finding is the total lack of any regulatory mechanisms to tackle AI-generated political content in Pakistan. Legal scholars have noted that AI-generated disinformation has not been criminalized in Pakistan, meaning that aggrieved individuals and political parties will have to rely on inappropriate legal recourse, such as defamation suits, which were not designed to tackle the forms of epistemic harm that are caused by synthetic media (VOA News, 2024). Juristically, the response of the Election Commission of Pakistan was inadequate to the overwhelming and novel challenge posed by AI-generated content, which, unlike other forms of media, is primarily distributed via social media. The absence of a regulatory response to this challenge is particularly notable when contextualized against the other jurisdictions that exhibited self-regulation within the voluntary frameworks of that global election cycle. Pakistan's institutional response is particularly inadequate and behind the curve when compared to other jurisdictions that faced well-documented and clear instances of AI-driven electoral manipulation.

In light of these findings, multiple necessary policy prescriptions can be identified to help enhance Pakistan's electoral integrity in line with the challenges presented by generative AI. The first recommendation would be to have the Election Commission of Pakistan set up rules to regulate the use of AI-generated content in political campaigning, as it would help differentiate between the legitimate and informed use of synthetic media, like the PTI AI generated campaign videos, and

deceptive and fraudulent use, like the fabricated polling day boycott messages (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The second recommendation would be to update the law to create specific criminal charges for the synthetic AI use to impersonate and digitally dis-inform voters, as it would eliminate the burden on affected individuals to pursue a case under the general and inadequate defamation law. The third recommendation would be for the Commission and supporting government entities to cultivate dedicated working relationships with the many Pakistani civil society and technology organizations, like the Digital Rights Foundation, Media Matters for Democracy, and the Free and Fair Election Network, who have already built up extensive capabilities in the monitoring and analysis use of AI in disinformation campaigns, but do so with no formal support. The fourth recommendation would be to create focused and clear protocols to regulate the use of internet and telecommunications shutdowns to enhance electoral integrity, as the current blanket and untargeted use of shutdowns increases AI-generated disinformation and contrasts with the intended goal of minimizing electoral-related violence.

Lastly, it may be beneficial for political parties in Pakistan to implement a voluntary code of conduct regarding the use of AI in their campaigns. This would help establish guidance around acceptable use and would help set clear expectations regarding campaign disclosures, similar to the laws developed around the use of AI in campaigns in other countries, like Norway (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). The case of Pakistan sheds light on the challenges facing many new democracies across the globe. This involves developing some level of governance and institutional capacity to use AI in campaigning, and addressing the challenges posed by AI in competitive environments. Currently, the technology of AI in campaigning is not so far advanced that it would be permanently integrated in a competitive environment (Diamond, 2010). The tools are becoming so advanced that they are indistinguishable from real, legitimate campaign tools. Democratic innovation in campaigning will become harder to define. It will place greater burdens on campaign management structures and civil societies and legal systems, which are almost non-existent in many developing democracies, including Pakistan. Subsequent studies on South Asian countries and observation of the effectiveness of various regulatory structures around the world will create a foundation for legitimizing the challenges democratic governance will face in the future, and will help devise governance strategies to address this.

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