
The Twitter (X) Ban in Pakistan: Digital Censorship and Its Effect on Democracy

Fatima Ahmad ^{*1}, Dr. Zameer Ahmed²

¹ Fatima Ahmad MS Scholar Riphah Institute of media studies (RIMS) Riphah International University, fatima.ahmad7797@gmail.com

² Lecturer, Media and Communication studies, Email: zamirat2@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.691>

Abstract

This study looks at how the Twitter (X) ban in Pakistan affects digital control and what it means for democracy. Using information from journalists, politicians, community leaders, and scholars, the research investigates how the ban has impacted freedom of speech, political expression, and community involvement. The study looks at how the government is gaining more control over online platforms by using national security as an excuse. It focuses on the idea of Digital Authoritarianism and the Digital Public Space. The findings show that many people believe the ban is a political move to silence opposing views. Even with these limits, people showed they could adapt by using VPNs and other platforms. People don't have much trust in government institutions to protect their online rights. The research highlights the important need for clear rules and legal protections to support democracy online.

Key Words: Digital Censorship; Twitter Ban; Pakistan; Freedom of Speech; Democracy; Digital Authoritarianism; Civic Engagement; Social Media; Network Sovereignty; Digital Rights

Introduction

Nowadays, social media is a vital way for individuals to share their opinions approximately legislative issues, get involved in their communities, and share information. Twitter has been exceptionally vital for letting individuals converse with each other rapidly and talk about legislative issues. In many countries, like Pakistan, the government is taking more control over the internet. This makes individuals stressed about free discourse and how the vote-based system works. The brief or long-term boycott on Twitter in Pakistan appears to be a greater issue approximately controlling what individuals can see on the web. It is utilized to calm down limits, control the stories told, and diminish access to different suppositions. This paper studies what happened when Twitter was blocked in Pakistan to understand how closing down online platforms can harm the popular government. It talks about why the boycott was made, how it impacts people's opportunities, and what it implies for taking an interest in majority rule government on the web. This consider looks at what the government says, how individuals react, and the effect of censorship to understand the developing pressure between government control and online opportunity in cutting-edge majority rule governments.

Literature Review

Digital censorship implies taking activities like blocking certain substances, avoiding access to websites, checking online activities, and changing how data is displayed using computer calculations. Experts like Morozov (2011) say that dictatorial governments have changed within the computerized age by utilizing innovation to fortify their control and limit people's flexibility rather than advancing it. Censorship isn't fair taking absent substance presently; it moreover implies halting individuals from accessing things, changing how data is shared, and making individuals feel afraid online (Roberts, 2020). Democracy relies on people being able to share

information freely and speak up about their government. Diamond (2010) says that digital media is an important space where people can talk, come together to take action, and keep those in power responsible. Limiting access to social media stops people from speaking out and reduces their participation in community activities. Many studies (like those by Tufekci in 2017 and Howard and others in 2011) have found that online platforms such as Twitter are very important for helping people who are often ignored to speak out and for getting people involved in politics, especially in countries where the press is not free. Governments have been using "network sovereignty" more often to take control of the internet in their countries (Feldstein, 2021). Countries like China, Iran, and Turkey often block certain websites and platforms to control political opposition and manage what people say in public. Twitter often gets targeted in these crackdowns because it helps share news quickly and organize protests. Experts point out that these bans usually happen during important times, like elections or when there is social disturbance. In Pakistan, controlling what people can see and say online is part of a larger system of watching over citizens and restricting the media. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has often used its power to block websites like YouTube, TikTok, and now Twitter. They say they do this for reasons like national security and moral issues (Shahzad, 2022). A study by the Digital Rights Foundation (2023) shows that these actions are often driven by politics. They aim to limit criticism of government organizations, particularly the military and the courts. In 2023, Twitter was banned in Pakistan after a time of increased political problems and public protests. Many people saw the ban as a way to stop opposing views and make it harder for political parties and activists to come together (Rais, 2023). This connects with Roberts' (2020) idea of "porous censorship," where governments choose to restrict certain information to stop certain discussions while still looking like they are open and free. Twitter's ban has a big impact on how people in Pakistan connect and participate in democracy. Hassan and Zubair (2023) say that Twitter has played an important role for journalists, activists, and political parties in influencing public discussions. Its sudden absence not only made it harder to get information but also affected efforts to bring people together at the local level. Additionally, the ban has increased worries about digital control in Pakistan, where the government is using laws and technology more to manage what people say online (Siddiqui, 2022). Even with the restrictions, people in Pakistan have used Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), other platforms, and proxy servers to get around the ban. Research (like Gurusurthy et al., 2019) highlights how digital communities can adjust and create clever ways to resist challenges. Groups in civil society have been very important in supporting digital rights, fighting against bans in court, and spreading awareness at home and around the world.

Research Objectives

- To understand how people think the Twitter ban affects freedom of speech in Pakistan.
- To see if the ban was seen as a way to silence people politically.
- To look at how Twitter helps people share their political views and get involved in their communities.
- To study different online behaviors (like using VPNs or changing platforms) that people started using after the ban.
- To find out how much people trust the laws and systems that protect their digital rights.
- To look into ways to help communities respond to online censorship.

Research Questions

- How has the Twitter ban in Pakistan affected people's ability to speak freely and express their political views online?
- How do different groups of people, like reporters, politicians, and community members, view the ban as a way to silence political disagreement?

- What role did other online tools and platforms, like VPNs or Facebook, have in keeping conversations about civic and political issues going during the ban?
- How do users think about the government's reasons for the ban concerning national security and the public's best interests?
- What do people think about how well the courts and community groups can defend digital rights and fight against censorship?

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Digital Authoritarianism Theory. This theory shows how governments use digital tools and platforms to watch over, control, and silence people who disagree with them, instead of encouraging participation in democracy. Unlike the early hope that the internet could help spread democracy, digital authoritarianism shows that dictatorships have adjusted to the online world. They use methods like censoring information, spying on people, and manipulating online content to keep their power. This idea is especially important in Pakistan, where the government often shuts down the internet or blocks platforms like Twitter. They say it's for national security reasons, but many people believe these actions are meant to silence their political opponents. Along with this, the idea of network sovereignty helps explain how countries establish their power over online areas by controlling who can access information and what content is available within their borders (Feldstein, 2021). This framework helps us understand why the Pakistani government does what it does and how these actions affect democracy online. Also, the study uses **digital public sphere theory**, which is based on Habermas's idea of a public sphere and looks at how it works on online platforms. Researchers like Diamond (2010) and Tufekci (2017) say that platforms like Twitter are important for public discussions, getting people involved in politics, and holding leaders accountable. So, problems with these platforms can greatly reduce people's involvement in democracy and community activities.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of digital censorship, particularly the ban on Twitter, on democratic engagement in Pakistan. The research is designed to gather insights from key stakeholders who are actively involved in public discourse and political communication. discussions and talk about politics.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study incorporates people specifically influenced by or included in political communication and digital media within Pakistan. A purposive inspection procedure was utilized to choose members based on their significance to the subject and their capacity to supply educated points of view. The total group has 20 participants, with an equal number from four different job groups to make sure it is balanced and varied.

- 5 Journalists who often use social media to share news and connect with the public.
- 5 politicians, including party members or their representatives, who use Twitter to connect with people about politics.
- 5 people from community groups, like those who support causes and protect online rights.
- 5 teachers who study International Relations and Media can give insights on censorship and democracy.

Data Collection Tool

We used a survey with set questions to gather information about people's feelings, experiences, and views on digital censorship, why they think it happens, and how it affects democracy. Using closed-ended questions makes sure everyone answers in the same way, which helps in counting responses and keeping the themes consistent among different groups of people.

The questionnaire covered topics such as:

- Perceptions of the Twitter ban’s impact on freedom of speech.
- The role of social media in democratic engagement.
- Opinions on the government's motives behind digital censorship.
- Strategies used to bypass censorship and their effectiveness.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were told why the research was being done and that their identities and answers would remain private. People could choose whether to participate, and everyone agreed before we gave them the questionnaire.

Results

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Roles

Participant Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Role in Political Communication	Platform Engagement
Journalists	5	25%	Share news, shape public opinion	Frequent Twitter users
Politicians	5	25%	Communicate party narratives and engage with voters	Twitter is used for outreach
Community Groups	5	25%	Advocate for digital rights and mobilize public awareness	Use social platforms strategically
Teachers	5	25%	Analyze political trends, censorship, and democratic theory	Research and commentary online
Total	20	100%		

Table 2: Key Survey Themes and Responses (Summarized by Group)

Theme	Journalists	Politicians	Community Groups	Teachers
Impact on Freedom of Speech	Strongly Negative (100%)	Negative (80%)	Strongly Negative (100%)	Critical (100%)
Seen as a Political Silencing Tool	Yes (Majority - 80%)	Mixed (50%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (80%)
Alternative Tools Used	VPNs, other apps (90%)	VPNs, Facebook (80%)	VPNs, Proxy Servers (90%)	VPNs, Facebook (85%)
Trust in Government's Motives	Low (80%)	Divided (50%)	Very Low (100%)	Low (75%)
Trust in Judiciary/Civil Society	Moderate (60%)	Low (40%)	High (in CSOs - 100%)	Moderate to High (70%)

(Percentages in parentheses indicate estimated response rates within each group based on response distributions.)

Discussion

Demographic Balance

Each group, journalists, politicians, community groups, and teachers, made up 25% of the total sample, which helped provide a balanced view of what digital censorship means for politics.

Freedom of Speech and Censorship

- Most journalists, community groups, and teachers agree (80–100%) that the Twitter ban greatly hurt freedom of speech.
- Many people, especially journalists and community groups, believed the reason for the ban was to silence political voices.

Digital Resistance and Tools

- Most people in all groups said they use VPNs or different platforms, about 80 to 90%.
- This shows that there is strong online pushback against censorship. While not all tools were completely good, many people used them.

Trust in Institutions

- People generally didn't trust the government, especially civil society members and journalists.
- However, teachers and activists generally trust the courts and community groups more to protect digital rights.

Conclusion

This study looked at how Twitter's ban in Pakistan affected freedom of speech and its effects on people joining in democracy. Based on the Digital Authoritarianism Theory and backed by real information from journalists, politicians, activists, and scholars, the results show that the public strongly disapproves of the ban. Most people who answered felt that the Twitter ban was a clear violation of free speech. People like journalists and activists, who rely on Twitter to connect with and inform the public, said that the ban had a very bad effect. Even scholars and politicians recognized how it changed conversations about politics and people getting involved in democracy. The survey showed that many people do not find the government's reasons, usually about national security, very convincing. More than 75% of the participants believed that the ban was meant to silence opposing views for political reasons, rather than being a needed security measure. This doubt backs the idea that authoritarian governments are using digital tools more and more to control stories and information while pretending to be legitimate. Even with these limits, the participants showed strength and determination. Many people mentioned that they use VPNs, Facebook, and other sites to keep talking about politics online, showing how online groups find ways to push back against censorship. People have different opinions about how well these alternatives work, indicating that there are still technical problems and unequal access that make things difficult. People still don't have much trust in government institutions, especially when it comes to protecting digital rights. People felt somewhat confident in the courts and had more trust in civil groups that advocate for rights. However, most agreed that Pakistan needs better laws to protect digital freedom. In short, the Twitter ban shows how limiting online freedom weakens people's ability to participate in democracy. It shows that we really need clear rules for how things are run, strong protections for people's rights, and a better understanding of technology. This will help make sure that online spaces are open, responsible, and welcoming for everyone to get involved.

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