

A Comparative Study of Social Media's Religiopolitical Use by Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

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Abstract

The political abuse of social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) has further complicated the religiopolitical dynamics in Pakistan. This study intends to understand the use of Facebook and X in the political journey of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), a mainstream political party, and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a religiopolitical party. A comparative literature review was conducted to critically analyze the peer-reviewed literature to identify the ways PTI and TLP have used Facebook and X to establish and nurture their political ideologies, particularly among youth. The findings of the content analysis revealed that both parties significantly benefitted from Facebook and X to project their political agenda, instill religion (Islam) in their political campaigns, and organize massive (violent) protests. The paper also provides contextual knowledge on social media platforms like Facebook and X being used in religiopolitical discourses and influencing the political attitude of netizens, particularly youth. This study argues that social media has shifted Pakistan's political dynamics such as electioneering, voter campaigns, and sustaining political control, which has caused increased religiopolitical radicalism among youth.

Key words: Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI); Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP); Facebook; Twitter; Social media; Religiopolitical; Youth

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1. BACKGROUND

Online political activity tends to shape and reshape public discourse to advance political coalitions, push back unfriendly narratives, and influence public perceptions of political goals (Mir et al., 2022). There has been a significant increase in digital propaganda for political purposes to influence public opinions and undermine the voices demanding political reforms. Propaganda is the "deliberate use of manipulation techniques to persuade the audience towards a biased opinion which helps a greater power or authority to develop the desirable perspective/choice in the target group" (Irfan & Khaja, 2019, p. 2). Whereas digital propaganda refers to the "use of machines in addition to human users to interact with humans or run a campaign on the internet, computer, and mobile devices designed to deliberately manipulate public opinion during crises or elections" (Neyazi, 2020, p. 39).

Propaganda for political mobilization is not a new phenomenon (Firdous, 2021). The scarcity of reliable information sources and influential people's control over traditional media outlets has increased the consumption of political content on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter (known as X since July 2023). Since disinformation, "misleading information that is intended to be (or at least anticipated to be) misleading" (Akram et al., 2022, p. 3), can easily proliferate on these platforms; they have become the breeding grounds of political propaganda. Amidst political chaos and uncertainty, Facebook and X are used to produce and reproduce

the discourses based on manipulated information. Such phenomenon of manipulating public opinion has expanded the notion of political deception, in the political landscapes of developed nations and developing democracies like Pakistan. (Akram et al., 2023)

The latest technologies like algorithms and bots used by Facebook and X are the ones often setting the stage for propaganda online. Their bots are used to create political content, follow the accounts of politicians, interact with other followers, spread propaganda around certain political events, and generate scandals and controversies against political outgroups (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022). Common users of Facebook and X perceive that all the content coming out of these platforms is being generated by humans supporting a particular political group or politician, but that is not always the case. For example, there is a growing use of bots on X to massively create and spread content to manipulate the public's political opinion. An estimated 9% to 15% of accounts on X were bots being used to spread fake news and political disinformation. X had a major crackdown against these bots in July 2018 and suspended around 70 million such accounts, but that does not mean that all the bot accounts were removed from X or that new ones have not been created after (Neyazi, 2020). Computational propaganda, "the use of algorithms to distribute information that has been shaped in the service of ideology" (Howard et al., 2023, p. 47), spreads massively and quickly through social media to set the narratives and shape (and reshape) the political attitude of netizens. Facebook remains the favorable platform for spreading manipulated political information as it gives less control to its users to customize their content choices (Bradshaw & Philip, 2019). Users' feed is influenced by many factors defined by Facebook algorithms such as time spent on a particular piece of content. People's interaction with online political content is not only based on their political interests, but the online attitudes of their friends are also a major factor. Facebook sorts its users algorithmically for a certain type of political content, even if they have not subscribed to that. The platform's algorithms drag its users to the political content while they are aiming to have random and non-political social activity online. (Thorson, 2019)

Since there is a positive relationship between online and offline political activities, the youth use Facebook and X for political awareness and political activism (Ahmad et al., 2019). Since social media activity does not remain merely online, it is reflected in their offline/daily religiopolitical behaviors. People tend to get political information from the online activities of their extended networks on Facebook or X, and this interaction urges them to share their (often) influenced political views. Though social media can help strengthen democracy by facilitating free speech, it can also weaken a democracy through political polarization (Ida et al., 2020). For

example, Facebook is used for online social interaction, but it also influences the political behavior of youth which is reflected in their offline activities (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Online political opinions integrated into the offline contexts can cause political polarization in a country (Neyazi, 2020).

The paper is organized in five sections: First, it builds the readers' understanding of the use of social media (Facebook and X) in religiopolitical mobilization, disinformation, and propaganda; Second, the broader picture of Facebook and X being used in Pakistani political discourse is presented; Third, a comparison of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) using Facebook and X to advance their religiopolitical propaganda is discussed; Fourth, arguments are made, conclusions are drawn, implications of this synthesis are highlighted; Lastly, the relevance of this synthesis with my dissertation focus is presented.

2. METHODS

While conceptualizing this study, a keywords-based systematic search was conducted in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database to find research studies published on the comparative politics of PTI and TLP for mobilizing youth through Facebook and Twitter. The WoS did not give any study relevant to the focus of this paper. Then the relevant peer-reviewed literature was selectively identified from different sources and conducted a critical comparative review to examine the usage of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for political mobilization and propaganda in the religiopolitical context of Pakistan. The review has focused on the research published on the religiopolitical factors of PTI and TLP concerning radical behaviors among youth. Evidence-based non-academic research was also reviewed to ensure the practitioners' perspectives related to the subject of this study. This study does not include content from any political sources such as the website of political parties, the statements of politicians and their blogs, or any material published on the Pakistan government's associated websites due to the factor of politically elected governments in the country. The in-depth content analysis of the identified literature was conducted to identify the trends and techniques of PTI and TLP using Facebook and Twitter for their political propaganda. The findings are grouped into key themes.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELIGIOPOLITICAL PROPAGANDA IN PAKISTAN

With the abuse of social media platforms like Facebook and X, disinformation and conspiracy theories have become the new normal in Pakistani politics which

has increased the incidence of violence and political radicalization (Akbar & Safdar, 2023). 64 percent of Pakistan's population is below 30 years of age which constitutes 44 percent of all the registered voters in the country (Shafaqat, 2018). It places youth in a critical position when it comes to the country's political dynamics where electoral autocracy is often practiced, i.e., the powerful military has a decisive role in electioneering (Talbot, 2021). The limited political awareness of youth places them at high risk of believing in the political conspiracies and disinformation they encounter during their social media activity (Mir & Siddiqui, 2022). Pakistan is among the countries where social media is heavily used to influence narratives both for domestic and foreign affairs (Bradshaw & Philip, 2019). The country has 35 percent internet penetration (Haider, 2022) and has 71.70 million (31.5 percent of its population) social media users as of January 2022 (Data Portal, 2022). Facebook had 43.55 million users whereas its associated app Facebook Messenger had 12.60 million users, and there were 3.40 million X users in the country. There are various ways Facebook and X are being abused in the political discourse of Pakistan and influence youth to join or support certain political ideologies in the country.

3.1 Social media in electioneering

The political parties in Pakistan are no exception to misusing Facebook and X for their political propaganda and electioneering. Though people use Facebook and X to record their feedback and concerns about political events in the country, political parties use the same platforms for their propaganda and defamation of opposition groups (Chaudhary et al., 2021). The media wings of political parties formally operate their political content online, comment on or troll opponents' content, and reply to the comments or messages of their followers (Ida et al., 2020). Facebook and X are the platforms mostly used in the political discourse of Pakistan, with Facebook being the leading one (Haider, 2022). Facebook and X are heavily used for electioneering in Pakistan. The political parties use these platforms for their outreach campaigns, connecting with local followers and local leadership, and sharing updates and instructions amidst political events or demonstrations in the country (Shafaqat, 2018).

During the General Elections of 2013 and 2018, the political content shared on Facebook played a vital role in the voting decisions (Chaudhary et al., 2021). They reported that political parties gain electoral fortune from Facebook and X by easily spreading their political manifesto and slogans to raise the voter count. Political parties use social media to influence the voting behaviors of voters with appeals to believe in specific political narratives. The parties have changed the public engagement strategy and now rely more on social media platforms instead of in-person engagements at the ground level (Ida et al., 2020). Ahmad and Sheikh

(2013) also found social media to be instrumental in changing the traditional political space in Pakistan where influential local leaders used to be the key drivers in electioneering. Unlike traditional politics, social media do not need influential local leaders to access a broader audience as political activists can now reach out to their audience online and without any community gatekeeping restriction.

3.2 Increasing political authority offline

Being a competitive authoritarian state, Pakistan is ranked among the ten worst countries in terms of internet and media freedoms where "democratic norms are quite often abused, and media freedom is attacked through various mechanisms" (Jamil, 2021, p. 6). Jamil argues that competitive authoritarianism is a hybrid political system having weak enforcement of rules, where elections are not free and impartial, and where authoritarian factions impose restrictions on unfavorable political voices and actors. Authoritarian practices such as propaganda against the opposition, media censorship, etc., frequently happen in Pakistan. Jamil further notes that authoritarian entities, which include the ruling political parties, do surveillance of social media to suppress opposing political voices such as journalists, activists, and bloggers. Amidst such abuse of social media to gain and maintain political authority, the political elites tend to acclaim and propagate their ideologies using specific forms of linguistic structure in their political discourse (Masroor et al., 2019).

Though social media like Facebook has increased political awareness, it has also shifted the trends in political loyalties toward those having more following or voices online (Ida et al., 2020). On X, politicians promote political agendas to build their positive image in front of the masses and denounce criticisms through manipulated facts. They follow the 'positive self' and 'negative others' presentation; a common binary conceptualization in the political discourse of Pakistan. The competing interest of political parties and their elite leaders can be understood through their posts and networks of followers, such as people liking, commenting, and following them. Such networks often serve as a group of trolls against opponent political voices on social media which tend to counter them through manipulated information. Hence platforms like X have become a political arena denouncing the opposition voices, regardless of critical thinking about the information and its implications on the country overall (Mir et al., 2022).

3.3 Youth at margins of political propaganda

There is a growing discussion on the political engagement of youth through Facebook and X. They use these platforms for political awareness, expression of political ideologies, and supporting or criticizing certain political narratives (Ida et al., 2020). Political mobilization through social media does not follow any formal pattern

of instructions as youth perceive the posts as per their social media literacy (SML) abilities (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). Pakistan has the second highest population of youth in the world, after Yemen, which places them as a key focus of the country's political agenda. Since Facebook is the most used platform in Pakistan for political information, youth tend to remain politically aware through Facebook, which influences their political perceptions (Ahmad et al., 2019). Pakistani youth spend an average of 8 hours per day on various social media platforms, mainly Facebook. It facilitates their political participation by providing knowledge of current affairs and offering access to political decision-makers through tag and text options (Ida, et al., 2020). The political information online invites youth for political participation. It has shifted one-way political communication through the websites of political parties to two-way communication allowing common people, particularly the youth, to raise voices or concerns about political happenings in the country (Ahmad et al., 2019). Since social media platforms allow their users to interact and freely share their views, it is also heavily used for political propaganda targeting youth who are the key users of these platforms. Political parties use these platforms to shape the political behaviors of youth, aiming to influence their political decision-making (Chaudhary et al., 2021).

4. COMPARATIVE CASE OF TWO POLITICAL PARTIES – PTI AND TLP

In fragile political contexts like Pakistan, political parties remain the key beneficiaries of propaganda and disinformation through Facebook and X to spread their political propaganda (Akram & Nasar, 2023). The religiopolitical landscape in Pakistan has been replicated on online platforms, particularly Facebook and X, since the 2013 general election season. Since social media has helped politicians to gain popularity and promote their political manifesto (Batool et al., 2022), two key political parties emerged alongside the emergence of social media in the country – Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). Though there are various studies on the religiopolitical discourses of PTI and TLP, there are no known studies until the time of this literature synthesis (September 2023) on social media factors in the political framings of both. This literature synthesis is one of the first studies that focus on social media in the religiopolitical dynamics of PTI and TLP. The PTI initiated the practice of strategically using social media for political propaganda and mobilizing youth to bring change in the country even through (violent) protests and rejecting any outgroup opinion or view. TLP is another political party that rose during the last decade through mass (violent) protests and gatherings widely organized

through religiopolitical mobilization content floating around social media platforms.

This study aims to understand the factors behind Pakistani youth's religiopolitical mobilization through Facebook and X by the mainstream (PTI) and religious (TLP) political parties. The key rationale behind selecting these two political parties is their popularity, "politics of protest" and emergence alongside the increased use of social media in the country. Both parties have emerged during the last decade in the political landscape of Pakistan, though PTI was established in 1996 (Insaf, n.d.). Both parties have used major social media-facilitated protests to further their political narratives. Another major factor in selecting these political parties is that both have used religion (Islam) to further their political campaigns. PTI has advanced/used the notion of the 'state of Medina' - a reference to the era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), while the TLP built its political campaign around blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

4.1 Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

The proactive use of social media, particularly Facebook and X, has been a key political strategy of PTI which made the 2013 elections in Pakistan the "first social media elections" (Faiz, 2022). PTI is the most popular political party on social media platforms, with 8.5 million followers on Facebook (@PTIOfficial) and 9.2 million on X (@ptiofficial) – as of September 2023. Since the leader of PTI, Imran Khan is the party's key figure, he has 19.7 million followers on X (@ImranKhanPTI) and 14 million on Facebook (@ImranKhanOfficial) – as of September 2023. When Khan joined TikTok (imrankhan.pti) in July 2023, he gained 4 million followers within two days (7.7 million as of September 2023) which reflects his popularity/populism among Pakistani youth, the key users of TikTok. Hence, this paper synthesizes three phases of Imran Khan's political journey when he and his party used Facebook and X to not only establish but strengthen their political agenda along with the incidences of radical violence.

4.1.1 General Elections 2013

People's belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories is a key challenge in the political spectrum of Pakistan, which affects not only the country's foreign relations but also its netizens' political behavior. Imran Khan reaped huge political success from engaging youth through social media in the 2013 general elections resulting in PTI emerging as the second biggest political party in the country. But Khan was not happy with the results and accused the Pakistani Muslim League (PMLN), the winner of elections in Punjab province and federal level, of electoral riggings. Immediately after the 2013 election, PTI led the politics of protests by staging sit-ins in major cities in demand of a probe into the alleged rigging in election outcomes. The PTI and its workers

heavily used Facebook and X to reject anything not conforming with PTI's political agenda to build their narrative of exclusivity and organized mass protests for its endorsement (Shafaqat, 2018). In 2014, Khan and his PTI workers protested all over the country, and a sit-in in Islamabad lasted 126 days while demanding the resignation of the (Pakistan Muslim League) Prime Minister and auditing of the election results (Iqbal, 2022). During this period, the sustained and strategic use of Facebook and X by PTI's social media team made Khan a political sensation not only within Pakistan but also overseas. The party assigned a team of dedicated youth pioneers in social media networks to lead its social media campaigns for building and strengthening PTI's narrative in the online spheres (Farooq, 2014).

4.1.2 General Elections 2018

In the years following the 2013 general elections, the PTI championed the political use of social media platforms. Imran Khan continued the political mobilization of youth through Facebook and X which expanded the popularity of his narratives and helped him become the Prime Minister of Pakistan in the 2018 general elections. During the election campaign, PTI used X the most among competing political parties which shows a significant relationship between increased tweeting behavior and their winning position in elections (Batool et al., 2022). The PTI used Facebook and X for electioneering in 2018 which gave them the charge of federal as well as Punjab governments, in addition to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan where they won for the second term (Shafaqat, 2018). During his time as Prime Minister of Pakistan, Khan continued the political mobilization of youth by tweeting (now X-ting) about various domestic and foreign affairs such as the post-colonial character of Western countries, victimhood of Muslims, and Islamophobia in the West (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). However, Khan was not happy with other's freedom of speech to criticize his government through social media. During Khan's regime, "social media also became a critical arena for bullying and harassment of critical voices (against Khan) ... Twitter (i.e., X) emerged as an arena of harassment where manufactured campaigns ... defamatory content, and doctored images were used to target journalists who questioned the government or the establishment. Khan relentlessly described critical media as a 'mafia' that deliberately put a negative spin on his government" (Faiz, 2022, p. 67). Hence, Khan's politics has relied on the notion of "negative others" even if he and his party has been the beneficiary of the similar political approaches and tactics.

4.1.3 Khan's Ouster from Office

Another key moment when PTI influenced public

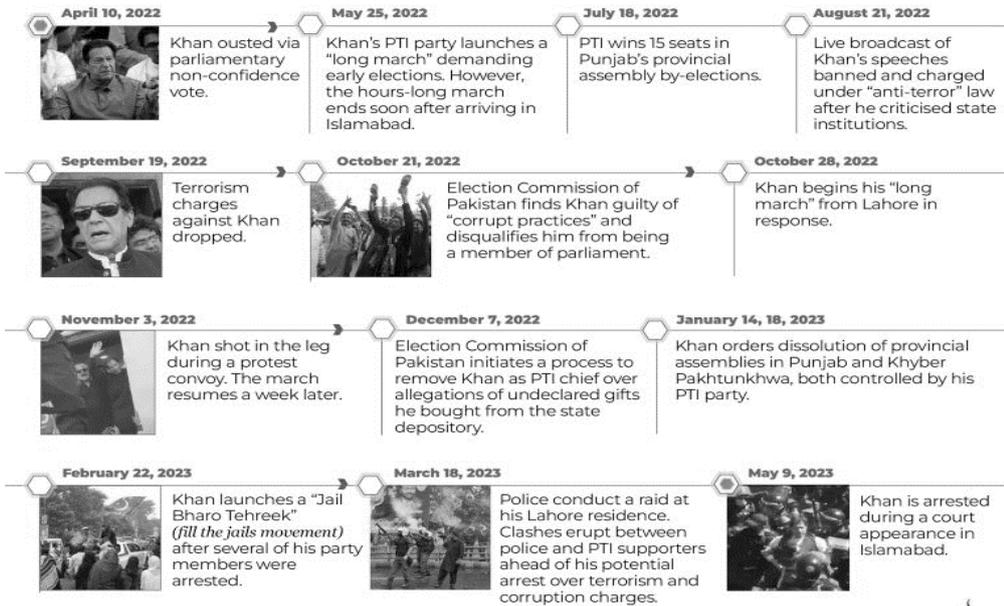
narratives through social media was that of Imran Khan's ouster on April 9, 2022, from the office of Prime Minister as a result of a no-confidence motion against him in the National Assembly. After his ouster, he launched a massive campaign via Facebook and X against his ouster and led a trend on social media as #ImportedHakoomatNamanazoor (imported government unacceptable) by building a narrative of the United States supporting a no-confidence motion against him. As a result, and as of June 2022, 46 percent of Pakistanis believed that the United States had a role in Khan's ouster (Mir & Siddiqui, 2022). Khan propagated through social media that the military establishment allied with other political parties to overthrow his government and further trapped him with more than 200 cases including treason and terrorism. "Pakistanis are losing hope every day as the (military) establishment is trying to impose crooks on us", Imran Khan posted on July 17, 2023, on his Facebook profile (Khan, 2023). Amidst all these cases, Pakistan's law enforcement agencies made various attempts to arrest Khan but could not as he effectively used social media (Facebook, X, and WhatsApp) to call his supporters to surround his residence. With each effort of his arrest, violence erupted and various injuries to his supporters and policemen were reported. But PTI workers' protection shield could not work on May 9, 2023, when Khan was arrested by the paramilitary officers in the court whose footage became instantly viral on social media platforms and sparked outrage among his supporters (Butt, 2023).

Violent protests erupted all over the country, angry supporters of PTI torched buildings and vehicles, and clashes between PTI protestors and police wounded dozens of people. It was the highest level of violent unrest in Pakistan since 2007 when former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated (Butt, 2023). Through social media, PTI called to "shut down Pakistan" over Khan's arrest stating that "Khan has always stood for you, now it time to stand for him" (Shahzad & Peshimam, 2023). The videos of violent protests following Khan's arrest were all over Facebook and X and were being coordinated through WhatsApp and Messenger – Facebook's chatting and calling services. The government suspended mobile and internet services across the country in addition to restricting access to protest videos on social media including Facebook and X (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2023). Khan continuously posted his speeches on social media platforms after being released in a few days to strengthen his narrative about foreign/military conspiracy backing his ouster. Such social media posts further infuriated the country's establishment. As a result, Khan was convicted by a court in a graft case for a three-year prison sentence for him which he has been serving since August 5, 2023.

PAKISTAN

Imran Khan arrested in Islamabad

After months of political crisis since being voted out of power last year, Pakistan's former prime minister is arrested over corruption allegations.



Source: Al Jazeera | Updated: May 9, 2023



@AJLabs ALJAZEERA

Figure 1
Timeline of Imran Khan's ouster to arrest (Source: Aljazeera)

4.2 Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

Following PTI and Imran Khan, the religious leaders in Pakistan have also shifted their political strategy to social media like Facebook and X and have prioritized social media over the traditional modes of political mobilization (Ahmed & Bilal, 2022). It has not only expanded their reach but also increased their interaction with targeted audiences, youth in this case. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is the latest hardline religious party in Pakistan's political landscape which started as Tehrik-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLR) in 2015 and then rebranded as TLP after the internal divide with Ashraf Jalali over calling off the 2017 protests (Islam et al., 2019). Khadim Rizvi, the head of TLP, was a government retired official who rose in the political landscape as the protector of blasphemy laws¹ in the country. His blunt tone in speeches got bigger fame through social media which gave him a boom in popularity (Sevea, 2018). After former Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer was assassinated in 2011 by his police guard Mumtaz Qadri on the accusation of

blasphemy, Rizvi started his political organizing. Rizvi visited various cities to deliver speeches urging Barelvis (sub-sect of Sunni Muslims) to come forward to protect the blasphemy laws in the country and demanding the release of Qadri waiting for his death sentence. Qadri was hanged on 29 February 2016 which gave TLP political momentum to gather wider and country-wide support (Sabat, et al., 2020). Rizvi died on November 19, 2020, immediately after a round of protests in Islamabad demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador over blasphemy issues in France. Rizvi left TLP's succession to his eldest son, Saad Rizvi, who was nominated as the leader of TLP on the third day (21 November 2020) of his father's death.

Rizvi got his fame through social media as his radical and violence-provoking speeches were being shared widely across various platforms. Rizvi's like-minded netizens broadly circulated his speeches through (re) sharing on their personal social media accounts which multiplies the reach of Rizvi's content (Khan, 2021). X suspended TLP and Rizvi's accounts stating "X suspends accounts that violate the X rules" in November 2018 (Dawn News, 2018). When I searched for "Khadim Rizvi" on Facebook (September 2023), it stated, "The term you searched for is sometimes associated with activities of dangerous individuals and organizations,

¹ Blasphemy law says that any "derogatory remarks, etc, in respect of the Holy Prophet [Muhammad] either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine". (AlJazeera, 2023)

which isn't allowed on Facebook". Hence, Rizvi and TLP's current presence on Facebook and X is mainly through their supporters who (re)share Rizvi's speeches and messages widely on their accounts as well as on various accounts created in the name of TLP and Rizvi. Their content on various other social media platforms, particularly YouTube, is routinely shared on Facebook and X. Among many, their popular accounts on YouTube are @AllamaKhadimHussainRizvi9263 (953,000 subscribers), @RizviMedia313 (11,800 subscribers), @LabbaikMediaCell313 (167,000 subscribers), and @TehreekLabbaikPakistanofficial (448,000 subscribers). The content on these YouTube accounts does not follow YouTube's community guidelines and has been a significant part of Rizvi's religiopolitical ideologies floating around online spaces. The social media content of TLP not only spreads religious hatred on digital spaces against non-Muslims but also against Muslims who do not align with their political views (Khan, 2021).

4.2.1 Blasphemy Laws for Political Agenda

TLP's politics is grounded in blasphemy laws in Pakistan. With the emergence of TLP, there was a rise in Islamist politics in the country as various other religious groups from the Barelvi, the majority sect of Pakistani Muslims, entered the political space through social media to advance their religiopolitical discourses (Sevea, 2018). Through Facebook, TLP urged Barelvi Sunni youth to fight for their Islamic cause of protecting the blasphemy laws in the country which has fueled hatred, sectarianism, and even violence among youth which benefited TLP's political aspirations. Abid et al. (2021) reported that TLP's use of Facebook spread hate speech and sectarianism in the country's largest population segment, i.e., Barelvi Muslims. There are several speeches by Khadim Rizvi on Facebook and other social media platforms propagating extreme religiopolitical views and urging violence against those not abiding by TLP's stance on blasphemy laws in the country (Khan, 2021).

TLP rose as a political party from a protest movement but retained its protest attitude as a continuous threat to the sitting governments, PMLN and PTI in this case. Geo News (2021), a leading national news agency, lists the following major protests in the political journey of TLP.

- November 2017: Violent march towards Islamabad against the alleged amendment in the blasphemy laws. Three weeks of sit-ins in Islamabad ended after the resignation of the law minister and agreement with the government.

- April 2018: 12 days of violent protests in Islamabad demanding the fulfillment of promises by the government in November 2017. The protests ended after an agreement with the government.

- October 2018: Jammed the whole country with violent strikes against the Supreme Court's ruling to free Asia Bibi in a blasphemy case.

- November 2018: Violent strikes against the arrest of Khadim Rizvi and other leadership of TLP. Rizvi was charged with treason and terrorism by the PTI government. X suspended Rizvi's account on 4th November 2018.

- November 2020: Marched in Islamabad against blasphemous caricatures in France and demanding the government to expel the French ambassador/boycott all relations or goods with/from France.

- April 2022: Violent protests on the call of Saad Rizvi, son of Khadim Rizvi, against the government not fulfilling its promise of expelling the French ambassador. TLP was banned by the PTI government.

- October 2021: TLP workers engaged in street violence, the government called the Rangers forces to maintain law and order. The ban was removed after TLP's agreement with the government.

TLP politically cashed the cause of *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* (finality of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood, PBUH) and *Namoos-e-Risalat* (honor of the Prophet Muhammad, PBUH) to reap political gains in the country. TLP endorsed its political agenda through a series of protests and agitations to demand or block policies deemed detrimental to their religious beliefs (Basit, 2020). Facebook and its associated apps (Messenger and WhatsApp) were heavily used to organize these protests, and the government had to temporarily shut down the social media platforms to disperse these protests. TLP workers massively circulated videos of violent protests to further fuel the intensity and scale of violence. In law enforcement's efforts to clear out the cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi from TLP protesters in their different rounds of protests, various policemen died due to attacks by the TLP protesters (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2022).

4.2.2 General Elections 2018

TLP extensively used Facebook and other social media tools to recruit more voices, solidify loyalties, and gain significant support in Pakistan's political arena (Ahmed & Bilal, 2022). Rizvi's blunt language (with frequent use of foul language and Punjabi jokes) made his place in public as "one of them" rather than a traditional politician from the upper or landlord family. His speeches went viral on social media, adding to his popularity. TLP became a "household name" by the 2018 general election through widespread media attention and support of radical entities and individuals in the country (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2022). Along with political gatherings and mass protests in the name of protecting blasphemy laws, TLP heavily used social media platforms like Facebook and X to campaign for votes. Videos of their political songs and sermons were largely circulated through these social media platforms. The poetic, humorous, and sometimes vulgar tone added a charismatic aspect to Rizvi's speeches gained popularity online (Sevea, 2018). Hence, TLP won three provincial seats in Sindh province during the 2018 general election

and received 2.2 million votes throughout the country (Shafqat, 2022). The results of the 2018 general election brought TLP as the fourth-largest party in the political realm of Pakistan, which not only increased TLP's political pressure on the elected government of PTI but also on other religious and political parties in the country.

5. DISCUSSION

Though the PTI's content on social media has helped increase political literacy among youth, its political narratives have promoted the notion of "othering" fueled with radicalism in youth's behavior. While the two parties discussed and analyzed in this literature synthesis are vastly different in terms of their memberships and ideologies it can be argued that there are various similarities in the political journey of Imran Khan / PTI and Rizvi / TLP. Both (ab)used social media to establish and strengthen their political ideologies and often did not hesitate to provoke violence. It provides comparable findings of religiopolitical use of Facebook and X by the PTI and TLP and their leadership – Khan and Rizvi.

5.1 Calling for change to establish a state like (ancient) Madinah

First, both Khan and Rizvi's argument of "change" for establishing a state like (ancient) Madinah (Riyasat-e-Madinah) which refers to the state established by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, after migrating from Makkah in 622 CE. Before the 2013 general elections, PTI rolled out a massive campaign on Facebook and X to defame almost all other political parties in the country and called on the youth to come forward to establish a "state like Madina". In his speeches, Khan promised to establish a welfare state like Madinah where everyone will get fundamental rights and facilities; and that would be a Naya (new) Pakistan (Yahya, 2020). Due to the PTI's massively strategic use of social media for electioneering, the 2013 elections were the country's first "social media election" (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Khan based his political campaign on rejecting almost all other political ideologies by naming himself the only hope for change in Pakistan. Similarly, TLP's Rizvi also took off his political shows when the country was heading to the 2018 general elections, and he built the narrative of the country needing religiopolitical "change" to implement "true" Islam. For Rizvi, "Barelvi-Sunni interpretation of Islam offer solutions to all problems of Pakistanis and Muslims in general" (p. 376) and his political vision remained around Islam being the only source to bring change in all political and economic fronts of the country (Sebat et al, 2020). The social media teams of TLP flooded Facebook with their calls for 'change' to establish an Islamic welfare state where the laws of the Prophet PBUH will be applicable – kind of similar messaging as Khan's state of Madinah. Hence, this paper argues that

both Khan and Rizvi flourished their political campaigns through Facebook and X on the notion of implementing an Islamic welfare system in the country derived from the state-ruling principles of Prophet PBUH's time. Since Rizvi could not get a chance to rule the country, whether Khan took steps to implement (some) of those rules or principles during his time as prime minister, is a highly contested discussion.

5.2 Growing through politics of violent protests

Second, both parties grew out of the politics of violent protests against the sitting governments. Though PTI organized massive political gatherings even before the 2013 general elections, their protests turned violent after losing the seats of the Prime Minister and Punjab Chief Minister; and later in 2022 after Khan's ouster from office. In their call for re-elections and the resignation of PMLN's Prime Minister, the PTI organized mass protests known as the Tsunami or *Azadi* (independence) March in 2014 in major cities and the 126 days long sit-in in Islamabad which paralyzed the functioning of the whole country (Iqbal, 2022). Facebook and WhatsApp were heavily used for the organizing of these protests, and Khan tweeted his official statements as directives for the PTI workers (protesters). Khan's posts and tweets sparked violence resulting in attacks on law enforcement agencies and personnel, government buildings, and public properties such as public transportation (Tehseen, 2018). On the other hand, the TLP's protests were also violent alleging the government for not listening to their demands around the issues related to blasphemy laws in the country. Rizvi's tone was more violent due to his ability to misinterpret Islamic sayings, hence calling for the public hangings or deaths of the officials of the sitting government. For example, "Pir Afzal Qadri, patron-in-chief of the TLP, declared that the Supreme Court judges who acquitted Aasia Bibi were 'wajib-ul-qatal (deserving of murder)'. (Hence) he demanded the dismissal of not just the judges but also the army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, senior generals, and (the then) Prime Minister Imran Khan and his entire government" (Sareen, 2021, p. 16). This public decree was instantly circulated on social media and heavily engaged with by the netizens. TLP workers also attacked public properties, government buildings, and even law enforcement officials; and suspended the country's operations by violently jamming the traffic. Various social media platforms, mainly Facebook, were used to share the videos and photos of their protests which increased the intensity of their protests. "During the sit-ins in 2017 and 2018, Rizvi's videos went viral on social media" (Basit, 2020, p. 388). Contrary to their history of protests and political mobilization through social media, the PTI government took an authoritative stance on TLP protests, jailed TLP workers, and designated TLP as a terrorist outfit – though the PTI government later removed this designation after a

deal with TLP. Furthermore, despite being the beneficiary of social media political usage, the PTI government increased censorship of online content and activity (Talbot, 2021).

5.3 Only leader to establish Riyasat-e-Madinah

Third, the political discourse of both the PTI and TLP is based on the rule of “negative others”. TLP portrayed itself as the only savior of “true” Islam in the country, whereas the PTI’s Khan presented himself as the only option to save the country from corrupt feudalistic politicians (Talbot, 2021). Amidst their portrayal of themselves as the only options, Rizvi and Khan both promised an Islamic governance system in the country (Hoodbhoy, 2021). To nurture their Islamic populism, they portrayed their personality in a “perceived” Islamic way. There are various videos and images on Facebook, which were shared and reshared thousands of times, presenting their Islamic image or attire. For example, Khan walked bare feet in Saudi Arabia (The Express Tribune, 2018), held a string of beads (Dutta, 2019), and quoted Islamic values in almost all his speeches. Similarly, Rizvi always wore a perceived Islamic outfit, held a stick, and referenced Islamic history every few minutes in almost all of his political speeches. Another common feature between Khan and Rizvi is their use of quite blunt and ‘I do not care’ language in their political discourse. Both have faced significant criticism for being so direct, especially about the foreign political affairs of the country. Though Rizvi was not in a government position, he still influenced foreign political affairs over the issue of blasphemy, e.g., urging the government of Pakistan to nuke France for allowing to publication of the sketches of Prophet PBUH in 2020 (Ahmad, 2020).

5.4 The notion of “negative others”

Fourth, both Khan and Rizvi emphasize “negative others” and them being the only solution to the country’s economic and political challenges. Khan’s tweets have been about “us” vs. “others” at the notion of exposing “others” whom he calls corrupt, mafia, and so on (Masroor et al., 2019; Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Through his speeches, tweets, and posts on social media, he portrayed himself as the only savior who understands the wants of people and the real issues of the country; and will be able to transform the nation based on Islamic principles (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). Rizvi has also cursed the sitting governments and other political parties by calling them corrupt, foreign agents, and not capable of running the country. The PTI’s language on Facebook and X has been divisive, individualistic, “don’t care”, and “negative others” (Ellis-Petersen, 2023). In their belief in exceptionalism, Khan has had urged PTI supporters to take violent measures and not be afraid of the law during their mass protests (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). A similar political approach was evident in the

TLP’s journey from a religious group to a religiopolitical party. The TLP’s tone was comparatively more violent and dangerous due to the higher penetration of religious elements in their protest politics (Basit, 2020). Their exceptionalism has been fueled through their active (ab)using of social media platforms in promoting their religiopolitical ideologies.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that social media such as/particularly Facebook and X are key influencing factors in the religiopolitical spectrum of Pakistan where political propagation has been shifting to online platforms. Though the political (ab)use of Facebook and X has increased political awareness among youth, it has also deepened the political polarization and violent radicalization among youth in Pakistan. The notion of “negative others” reflected in their social media content not only influences youth’s online activity but also their offline behaviors and political framings or worldviews. The politics of protests (sometimes/often violent) and rejecting outgroup political opinions have induced radicalism in youth’s behaviors which has undermined the traits of embracing diversity and accepting the difference of opinions. This paper argues that increased political ab(usage) of social media increases radicalism and extremism among youth who are the major users of these platforms. Since social media has become a key communication tool and political content cannot / should not be banned from these platforms, it makes promoting critical thinking and social media literacy among youth more urgent than ever.

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