

SOCIAL MEDIA, RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY IN PAKISTAN IN THE ERA OF DISRUPTION

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My great grandfather took a mic from Australia for the Mosque he built in Lahore a hundred years ago. The next day there was a fatwa against him that he has brought a devil's tool from Australia; these days it would be hard to find a Mosque without it there.¹

We are living in an era of disruption and the technological advancements have enabled us to manage work and family through remote access; replacing paper currency with cryptocurrency & phone wallets; and call centres with robot assistance. Technological disruptions are impacting social as well as spiritual relationships, leading to the emergence of virtual religious/spiritual communities, weakening the territorial divide. New technologies have also unsettled the status quo in these communities, as disruptive technologies* have enabled the emergence of new power centres, platforms and voices. Previously disempowered communities and groups are gaining agency using social media and effective use of global networks in the cyberspace. This paper explores the broader scene of disruptive technologies in relation to Muslims and Islam. It examines the social media landscape in Pakistan within the broader milieu of disruptive technologies. The research seeks to explore the impact of disruptive

*For the purpose of this paper, the term disruptive technology refers to the online/social media platforms that have disrupted traditional congregations, religious hierarchies of established institutions and engagement with religion in physical space and introduced cyber/virtual space as an alternative mode to engage with religion and congregate, free from the established institutional and territorial boundaries.

technologies on the society in Pakistan, examining the interplay of religion and religiosity in the era of disruptions, through four case studies selected from recent events in Pakistan. The article makes use of secondary resources to appraise the broader milieu of social media then, critically examines these case studies to know the impact of social media. These case studies highlight that social media is a powerful medium utilised by social activists as well as religious groups, a new phenomenon in the context of Pakistan.

Keywords: Disruptive technologies; social media; religion & religiosity; Pakistan.

Introduction

Similar to other societies, people in Pakistan are increasingly relying on new technologies, and social media platforms have given voice to previously disenfranchised groups, youth, social activists and religious groups. In this situation it will be naïve to imagine that technology would not impact upon our spiritual lives; faith and religious selves. The negative impacts of virtual reality and virtual relationships have been widely debated and how the social media is fracturing our traditional relationship with family, friends and work colleagues. However, the research on the impact of social media on religious or spiritual lives has been rather limited. Religious scholars and preachers have embraced internet technology in order to reach, engage and connect with their audience in new ways, taking religion outside the confines of established religious institutions and places of worship, into the pockets of followers via their mobile devices. When it comes to social media, its followers quickly embrace religious-inspired content, much more than the liberal democratic content that pushes for diversity, tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Jensen has noted that, “God is the second most sought after reality on the Internet”². George states that in 2001 “one out of every four Internet users has sought religious or spiritual information at one point or another in their virtual travels”, demonstrating the significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of Internet users.³

The research is exploratory in nature and is based on critical examination of secondary sources and interpretative analysis of the impact of disruptive technologies in Pakistan. It aims to summarise, interpret and analyse scholarly works published in the context of social media and religion and religiosity, and employ disruptive technology as a framework to critically examine the impact of social media in Pakistan. The research is designed in three parts; the first part deals with the broader context

of Muslims, Islam and Era of Disruption; the second part is an appraisal of disruptive technologies, new media and Social Networks in Pakistan, and the final part is based on selected case studies from Pakistan. The research conclusions note key findings regarding the usage of social media by social activists and religious groups and its impact through the selected case studies.

Muslims, Islam and Era of Disruption

Theoretically speaking religions, themselves were a disruption to the (dis)order in various historical periods, introduced new ideas and ways of life to the people in the area where these were revealed and beyond, hence religious communities have hypothetically lived through the “eras of disruption”. While tracing the transformation of ummah, Mandaville contends that:

In early Islam, oral transmission was the preferred mode of disseminating religious knowledge with each ‘alim granting his student an ijaza (‘license’) which permitted him to pass on the texts of his teacher....This state of affairs allowed the ulama and their associates (scribes, calligraphers, etc.) to maintain a virtual monopoly over the production of authoritative religious knowledge.... Gradually Muslims found it easier and easier to bypass the ulama in the search for authentic Islam and for new ways of thinking about their religion....The new media opened up new spaces of religious contestation where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by the wider public....A long apprenticeship under an established man of learning [was] no longer a necessary prerequisite to legitimizing one’s own religious knowledge.⁴

He argues that digitisation of Islamic sources has enabled Muslims to engage with the scriptures in innovative ways, leading to virtual Islam, virtual ulema and virtual ummah. However, virtual space can potentially replicate the physical world of Islam, because the fundamentals would remain the same, as Lawrence notes:

There are still the same guideposts: the scripture (the Qur’ān), the person (the Prophet) and the law (shari’ah, and with it, the custodians of Muslim standards, the ulama), but each—the book, the prophet, the moral custodian—has to be defined or redefined in

cyberspace. And since not all Muslims have equal power or equal access to the Web, there is already a pre-selection, a filtering, of Muslim perspectives on the Net.⁵

He further argues that, “Muslim cybernauts will be pivotal players in the information revolution: women, men, *Sūfī*, Shi‘its, and Sunnis will all play their distinctive, if not equivalent, roles”.⁶ Bunt predicted that improved Internet access will blur the line between “offline and online Qur’ānic content” yet “the organizations and individuals who are dominant in non-virtual contexts are not necessarily those who emerge at the top of a Google listing”.⁷ He notes that these technological disruptions will especially benefit marginalized voices as well as minorities within Muslim communities. George is of the view that:

the virtual world may be used to simply repeat the “power” roles of conventional communities....in virtual religious communities, the authoritarian leadership of a single member controlling the group tends to be maintained in the electronic environment, just as there is a dominant, controlling leader in many face-to-face religious gatherings.⁸

The technological disruptions within the space of “religion and religiosity in the era of disruption” means that opportunities and challenges will be diverse for various stakeholders and this space would remain highly contested. Smart phones have brought technology to our fingertips and the use of technology among people of Muslim faith are no different from others - they text; chat; download apps; play games; use social media, and shop online. There are websites and apps that cater to Muslim population and have completely cloned popular social media such as WhatsApp and facebook. Despite resistance to the use of technology by a section of traditional Muslims and numerous *fatāwā* issued by scholars of traditionalist Islam - religious scholars and communities have embraced technology. Religious scholars increase their audience through online preaching hence the rise of ‘televangelical Islam’. It has been argued that 1.6 billions Muslims across the world are part of the global digital economy tapped by entrepreneurs and tech geeks alike, offering apps to cater to this niche market of Muslims living in Muslim countries as well as in the West. Wheeler argues that the “Internet is a vehicle for change, as well as a tool with which to maintain the status quo. It’s a vehicle for the voice of the small, at the same time that it is a tool of the state

security apparatus (the strong). It is a technology that both supports and interrupts Islamic social values.”⁹ She raises the “question of access to the Internet... as the Muslim world has been one of the slowest sectors of global civil society to transition to the Information age”.¹⁰ She extends her arguments by suggesting that:

the Internet enables Muslims who hold relatively marginal positions within their larger societies (from homosexuals to terrorists) to find community online, and to express their values in a way that the authoritarian states in which they often reside forbid. It is within this spectrum of cyberpractices that we glimpse the seeds of change, the power of the centre, and at the same time, the huge gaps between Muslim life online, and the existence of the ummah world wide.¹¹

It is not surprising then that Muslim communities are embracing technologies to engage with wider communities, and are part of this global digital economy using apps/technologies such as Bayan Qur’ān; Feeling Blessed; *Hajj* net; *Halāl* Gems; Have *Halāl* Will Travel; Investroo; Islamic GPS; Islamophobia reporting; Learn Qur’ān; Mengaji app; Modanisa; Muslim Pro; Muzmatch; Noor Quest; Qur’ān Academy; Ramadan Legacy; Scan *Halāl*; Seerah App; Tarjimly; Urban *Halāl*; *Dhabīḥah* - especially catering to the Muslims living in the western countries.¹²

Barendregt argues that “Muslim youngsters are adopting technology to distance themselves from older, traditional practices while also challenging Western models.”¹³ Stanton (2015) is of the view that religious communities need to re-evaluate the notion of community as “individuals can personalize, customize, and adapt just about everything in their lives” hence assuming that religious community members would not change and adapt with changing times and new technologies.¹⁴ He argues that in these times of social change resulting from disruptions, one can observe not merely the vulnerability but also the strength of religion, especially “if it remains attuned to the change and disruption taking place all around it”. He further contends that, “so long as religious ideas are compelling, so too will be our religious community. So long as religious ideas are out of touch, or unresponsive to social change, so too will be our religious communities.”¹⁵

Disruptive technology has provided an avenue to broadcast preachers/scholars’ sermon/message to a large congregation who can

watch these at a time of their choice, however, one has to ask if it has disrupted the hierarchies or contents of the message or merely changed the mode of communication, replacing the physical with virtual presence. Scholars alert that there is a possibility of losing spiritual humility in the efforts to increase the followers of the congregation as the future religious leadership will be in the hands of online performers rather than scholars and can potentially disrupt the existing hierarchies and status quo of religious order. George cautiously alerts that, “some practices... transformed by the technology... may detract from the sense of a religious gathering: verbal exchanges become shorter, emotional solidarity with co-participants is weaker, and there is less orderliness to the prayer meetings.”¹⁶ Al-Rawa suggests that there is “evidence that traditional religious preachers are finding social networking sites as very helpful tools to spread their messages and connect with online audiences.”¹⁷ He argues that:

this online public sphere does not mean that the virtual Islamic Ummah as a whole is present there; instead, it is largely divided among often separate online communities in what is termed as the public sphericules.... This concept indicates that there is no ideal single public sphere as Habermas envisioned; instead, there are multiple public spheres.... offline activists are moving online to spread their messages and organise, making the Internet a polarised platform.¹⁸

He further states that on facebook the,

role of the traditional preacher is taken over by a casual and often secular poster who stirs similar reactions found in real mosques. The Facebook page organiser becomes a virtual preacher himself, and the online Muslim community members who gather in these particular public sphericules tend to agree and follow his pro-Islamic views.... Besides, offline and online religious practices are closely connected, and there is a clear shift in authority as the traditional Muslim preacher at the mosque is replaced by a layman who only needs to know basic facts about religion aside from knowing how to create a Facebook page and post comments.¹⁹

New preachers no longer need the backing of established religious institutions as they seek legitimacy from their online followers. This was

witnessed during a recent case involving personal conduct of a Pakistani/American preacher Nouman Ali Khan whose followers dismissed allegations of inappropriate behaviour and effectively silenced the critics, highlighting the lack of accountability as well as the right to a fair trial through established religious institutions or the court of law.²⁰ Such incidents can potentially have significant disruptive influence, as social media users influence the outcomes of any grievances rather than using institutional mechanisms. It is also true that the anonymity in the cyberspace allows expression of dissent as well engagement with contentious issues without fear, however it does not mean that it will save users from harm as cyberspace replicates human behaviour and online bullying, harassment and stalking remains prevalent.

While comparing the functions of physical and virtual spaces As argues that the, “technological developments have a tendency to offend at first sight, but they are accepted as a part of life very quickly if the role they fill is vital”.²¹ His comparison highlights the common features of faith-based practices in the mosque as well as virtual spaces utilizing social media, indicating the near replication of activities/rituals in the virtual space.

Table.1
The distribution of mosque activities into virtual and physical spaces

Functions of religious space	Performed physically	Performed virtually
<i>Adhān</i> (call for prayer)	Use minaret for call to prayer and to indicate location of prayer space.	Work with online <i>adhān</i> service providers, list web portal on affiliated Web sites and search engine.
Ablution	Provide ablution fountain.	List tutorials for the ablution ritual.
<i>Khuṭbah</i> (sermon)	Provide screen and required equipment for the projection of preach from the	Open portals for listening and watching previous and/or further

	<i>Ka'bah.</i>	preaches.
Praying	Offer space for praying postures like sitting, bowing, and prostrating.	Provide portals to attend prayers.
Learning	Provide Imam for consultation and technical issues	Provide portals for online educational programs, supply multimedia application.
Socializing	Create new or modify existing spaces for socializing.	Create chat rooms and billboards, create an awareness of the presence of others.

Source: As, (2006, 61) The Digital Mosque.

With the expansion of religion in the virtual space, power bases of media-savvy religious figures would grow as compared to the traditional scholars and institutions. Campbell argues that, "In the age of internet, the image of ummah as a network has become an important metaphor of providing continuity between ancient and contemporary aspects of Islam".²² The religious individuals potentially have more options and are not restricted by geography, meaning that the faith communities will no longer be defined by geography but rather by belief. It can be argued that individuals reinforce the existing beliefs rather than engaging with diverse ideas and viewpoints and even in cyberspace, associate with like-minded people hence the group members reinforce their beliefs and are further polarized, rather than understanding alternative views. This fits into the notion of "Muslim Ummah" as propagated by many but also used by criminal elements such as Daesh to rally support across the globe.

The tension arising from the marketing of religion becomes itself an important mediator of the relationship between piety, technology and expressions of individuality. Adapting Bayat's analogy of "social non-movements" it can be argued that ordinary Muslims from different

geographical locations may seek social change and without being part of an organized social movement become a community visible in the cyberspace as well as physical space.²³ The politicization of Islam as a reaction of the Western foreign policy agendas have pushed Muslims to reflect on their identity as they navigate through the “secular” virtual public spaces to demonstrate the possibility of being Muslim, modern and secular at the same time; by leaving a traditional Muslim community and by carving out a modern Muslim identity without assimilating in the West reclaiming the role of Islam in the process. Echchaibi calls the process “a strategy to define the terms of their entry into modernity and modern spaces. Muslims become then “present” in modernity.”²⁴

Notwithstanding the impact and influence of disruptive technologies, critical engagement with the issue of access and filtering of information needs to be examined. What people search and how search engines filter information based on previous searches determines what is accessed. Sunstein argues that:

People should be exposed to materials they would not have chosen in advance . . . topics and points of view we have not sought out and perhaps find irritating, are central to democracy and even to freedom itself. . . . What is different is a dramatic increase in individual control over content, along with a corresponding decrease in the power of general-interest intermediaries . . . these intermediaries have performed some important democratic functions.²⁵

It needs to be examined whether the status quo has been disrupted or the disruption remains an illusion, giving a false sense of empowerment and change – an adaptation of the status quo rather than invoking new interpretations. The era of disruptions provides information as well as misinformation blurring the distinction between expert and amateurs, preacher and the scholar, replicating the physical divide into the virtual space, rallying up hatred and intolerance in the name of religion. Technological disruptions can potentially disrupt the existing religious hierarchies yet they will create new ones, replacing one set of social norms with the other, that may not necessarily be an innovation as individual behaviour is also influenced by societal norms. In the following section, disruptive technologies, new media and social networks in Pakistan are broadly examined to understand the specific context.

Disruptive technologies, new media and Social Networks in Pakistan

It needs to be acknowledged that Internet and smart phones enable us to connect globally and seek information and build relationships in ways never imagined or experienced previously. Social media have created new networks different from previous modes of networking as we rely on social media such as Facebook; WhatsApp; Instagram; and twitter rather than writing letters or even emails, or by making phone calls. The world map of social networks highlights that Facebook remains a preferred platform to connect in larger part of the globe.

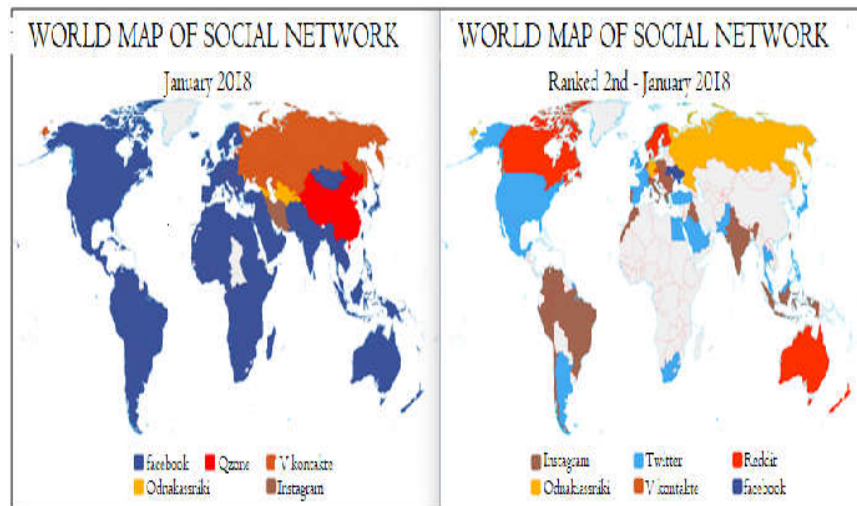


Fig-1

Global social media landscape

Source: <http://vincos.it/world-map-of-social-networks/>

In line with the global trends, Facebook remains a preferred media in Pakistan as well. As illustrated below there are over 45 Million Internet users in Pakistan, 35 million of these use social media.²⁶ In 2018, Pakistan had 35 million active fb users, followed by WhatsApp; Instagram, and twitter users.

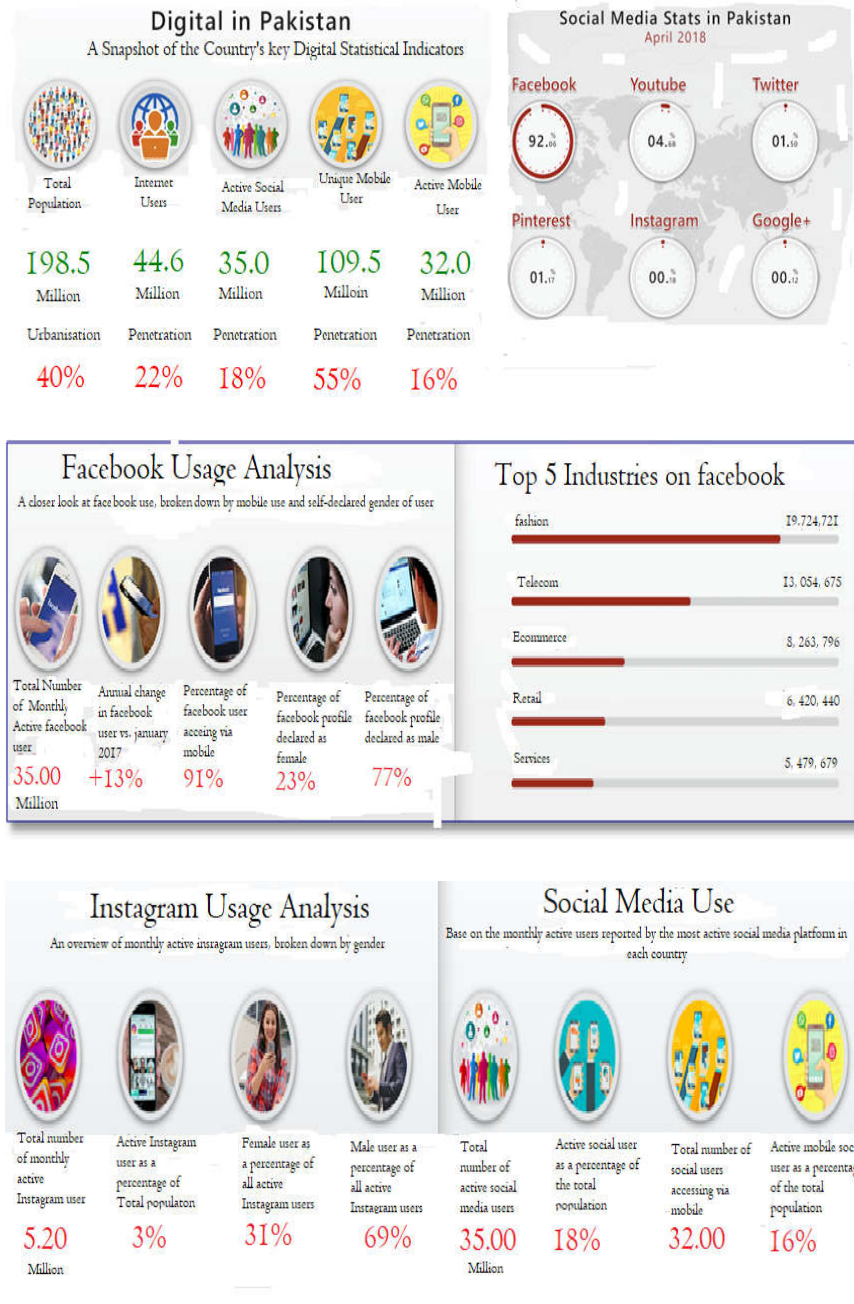


Fig-2

Pakistan's Social media landscape

Source: <http://alphapro.pk/pakistan-social-media-stats-2018/>

“Pakistan Social Media Stats” has ranked Fashion as number one industry, searched by facebook users.²⁷ Contrary to these findings, Khan et al. have noted that Pakistani users of social media follow sportsmen, religious scholars and marketing companies.²⁸ Pakistan Social Media Stats analysis reveals that from 35 million facebook users, female proportion is 23%, while from 5.2 million instagram users, female proportion is 31%, highlighting the gender disparity in social media access and use among the population. This gender disparity is also prevalent when one examines the number of male and female religious scholars who have presence in the social media space (or otherwise) in Pakistan. One can argue that social media now offers a public space for women to engage with and influence religious space, bypassing the hierarchies of established religious institutions. Stahl argues that technology (computers) has been shaped by male values and traces its origin in scriptures, noting the disparity between male and female technology users.²⁹ Considering the number of women theologians in established religions and their presence in the social media space, one can notice that the number of women televangelicals remains low even in the Christian world, and female preachers (Voskamp,³⁰ Meyer,³¹ Caine,³² and Moore³³) primarily have female audience.

Muslim women (scholars or otherwise) have also gained entry into this space and offer interpretations of Islam (liberal/traditional alike) - a legitimate public space previously denied to them. In Pakistan, one can only note Rafat Hassan³⁴; Asma Barlas³⁵ and Farhat Hashmi³⁶ - though Hassan and Barlas are academics based in North America, while Hashmi is based in Pakistan, followed in Pakistan as well as the West. Hashmi opines: “It is sad that there is such a dearth of Islamic scholars who are women. It is very important that women come into this field and invest their time into research in Islamic Studies. In fact, there is nothing against a woman becoming a Muftiah”.³⁷ Despite the social media performance and large audience Hashmi’s interpretations are influenced by traditionalist interpretations of Islam, focusing on traditional role of women as home makers hence conforming to the norms rather than disrupting the space with new interpretations while addressing Muslim women’s current concerns, even though she provides advice to Muslim women on how to practice faith while living in the West. Disruptive technologies have enabled a different engagement with the religion hence enhanced understanding on what it means to be a Muslim in current times. It needs to go beyond the modern (liberal) narratives disseminated by the state or

the scholars and critically evaluate on how people are using technology to reimagine their relationship with religion in their daily lives.

Pakistan thrives on its many contradictions and complexities, especially around religion, religiosity and new technologies. When it comes to social media, its followers in Pakistan quickly embrace religious-inspired content, despite the fact that users search is more focused on fashion rather than faith. It is interesting to note that in 2000, only 133900 people in Pakistan were internet users and this number rose to 44,608,065 in Dec. 2017.³⁸ During the same period nearly 89 licences were issued to establish new TV channels, some have little presence while the others such as Ahlebait TV; ARY QTV; Azaan TV; Bethat TV; BNSW TV; Dua channel (Shia sect); Gawahi TV (Christian community in Pakistan); Hadees TV; Hadi TV (Shia Sect); Haq TV; Huda TV (Shia Sec); Iqra TV; Islam TV; Islam channel urdu; Labbaik TV; Madani Channel; Makkah and Medinah live; Mashriq TV (pushto/urdu); Minhaj TV; Noor TV; Paigham TV; Peace TV urdu; Raah TV; Takbeer TV; Tehzeeb TV; Ummah channel have following among different sections of society.³⁹ In addition to these TV channels, heaps of websites were developed and searched to engage with online community seeking information on faith and faith-based practices.⁴⁰ Number of preachers and scholars offering lectures via YouTube has grown exponentially, some commonly noted names include: Javed Ahmed Ghamdi,⁴¹ Dr Israr Ahmed,⁴² Tahir ul-Qadri,⁴³ Zakir Naik,⁴⁴ Tariq Jamil⁴⁵ and Noman Ali Khan⁴⁶. Mushrooming of TV channels has provided a forum to large and small groups alike, however, outreach and target audience rely on accessing the material via TVs. Scholars, celebrity preachers and religious groups using social media have broader outreach and can rally support in real time, bring supporters on the streets to protest and create online forums to lobby for various causes.

The next section analyzes four incidents in Pakistan as case studies, particularly focusing on the use of social media employed by various religious groups as well as civil society, examining the disruptions resulting from the interplay of social media, religion and politics.

CASE STUDIES FROM PAKISTAN

Electoral Act 2017

In November 2017, the government in Pakistan passed a bill “Electoral Act 2017” which the opposition parties opposed on grounds that the bill is politically motivated to restore previous Prime Minister

hence passed in haste without scrutiny.⁴⁷ Among other changes the bill removed a clause in voter registration (Form A) ‘for general elections requiring an affidavit’ and instead included ‘declaration of faith’. It needs to be noted that section 7C of Electoral Bill 2017, “states that if an enrolled voter’s belief in the finality of Prophet Muhammad’s (ﷺ) prophethood is contended, they shall have to sign a declaration stating so, failing which their “name shall be deleted from the joint electoral rolls and added to a supplementary list of voters in the same electoral area as non-Muslim””.⁴⁸ In addition to the opposition of the bill on political grounds, social media was abuzz that the government has changed *Khatm-i-Naboowat* (finality of the prophethood) laws as well, thus the bill became a religio-political issue.⁴⁹ This led to a sit-in protest by religious groups led by Khadim Rizvi in Islamabad and Lahore. The protesters declared the change as blasphemous and an appeasement of Ahmadīs (Ahmadis/Qadianis were declared non-Muslims in 1974).

Despite government assurances that there has been no change in the laws pertaining to *Khatm-i-Naboowat*, protestors wanted the Federal Minister for Law and Justice to resign, who earlier had posted a video message declaring that he believed in the finality of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), yet his ancestral home was attacked by protesting mob, putting his family’s safety at risk. Angry protesters had earlier attacked the residences of a number of politicians and parliamentarians, even injuring a Member of the Parliament.⁵⁰ As the protests gained momentum, hundreds of protesters were arrested by the police in Islamabad, resulting in retaliatory violence by the protestors against the police personnel as well as public buildings and assets. Although the government had shut down Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in Islamabad and Rawalpindi to block coverage of the operation, it further fuelled the anger and more protestors reached the capital city to join the sit-in protesters. Leaders of the protesters issued a list of demands once army was involved to end the political impasse, brokering a deal with Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYR), accepting all their demands, even giving cash to protesters to return to their homes.⁵¹ Social media was effectively used to garner support and mobilise protestors but also for propaganda regarding the contents of the electoral bill hence influencing the polity as well as seeking legitimacy that was witnessed during the general elections. TLYR led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi contested elections under the registered name Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan (TLP),⁵² won more than 2.23 million votes in the national assembly; more than 2.38 million provincial votes,⁵³

and got two MP elected in Sindh province a spectacular rise for an organisation that gained national prominence less than a year earlier.⁵⁴

Zainab Rape/Murder Case (2018)

In January 2018, a minor girl (6Y) was abducted and her body was found later dumped in garbage; the autopsy revealed that the child was raped and strangled to death.⁵⁵ Local communities were outraged as this was not an isolated incident in the area (notorious for crimes against minors) and police had failed to arrest the culprits in previous cases.⁵⁶ During the protests TLYR workers clashed with the police and the protest took a violent turn, spiraling the law and order situation out of control.⁵⁷ On failing to control the situation, the Police used excessive force to disperse the protesters, further angering people, resulting in countrywide protests and condemnation by civil society activists; human rights organisations; politicians and celebrities. The head of a religious political party led Zainab's funeral prayer, in a show of solidarity with local communities as well as consolidate their position as representative of religious communities in Pakistan.

As the police failed to make any progresses, social media appeals "Justice for Zainab" enabled the relatives to access CCTV footage that was widely circulated in an attempt to identify the abductor. This enabled the arrest of a young man from the neighbourhood, who confessed to the crime (including previous rapes/murders of minors), further evidence through the polygraph test and DNA match confirmed that he was a serial rapist and murderer. Due to public pressure and severity of the crimes the case was tried under Section 7 of the Anti Terrorism Act (ATA) in Anti Terrorism Court, which handed Imran Ali, four counts of death penalty; one life term imprisonment; 7-year jail term, and Rs. 4.1 million in fines to be paid to the heirs of the victims.⁵⁸ The Supreme Court rejected his final appeal in June 2018, and he was executed on 17th October 2018.⁵⁹ One can witness the potential of social media and how it can lead to solidarity for a cause, gaining support from religious groups and activists alike.

Economic Advisory Council of Pakistan Appointments 2018

The current government of Pakistan appointed a renowned economist Prof. Atif Mian as advisor to Economic Advisory Council in mid 2018. Soon after the announcement a Member of the Parliament tweeted that

the government should not have appointed an Ahmadi. Her own party (PPP) dissociated from the tweet and she was widely condemned for the tweet.⁶⁰ Initially this appointment was applauded for being made on merit rather than his faith, though Ahmadis are barred from holding certain offices (President; Prime Minister; Judges in the Federal Shariat Court; legal practitioners for Shariat Court;⁶¹ Council of Islamic Ideology). While there was support from the liberal/moderate sections of the civil society, encouraging the government to stand firm, various religious groups as well as religious political parties widely condemned the government even though there is no constitutional bar on such advisory appointments. Opposition parties submitted a call attention notice in the Senate raising objections to the appointment while the government defended its decision especially focusing on the rights of the minorities.⁶² Religious groups not only condemned the appointment but also filed a petition in Islamabad High Court challenging the appointment on religious grounds.⁶³ They also announced a sit-in protest in the capital after Friday prayers and started mobilizing their supporters via social media. The government caved in and reversed the decision under the pressure exerted through social media especially twitter.⁶⁴

Blasphemy laws and the Supreme Court appeal of Asia Bibi (2010-2018)

In June 2009, a mob had attacked the home of a Christian family blaming a Christian woman for insulting the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ),⁶⁵ beating all family members. Initially the police rescued the family, however, they later arrested Asia Bibi for insulting the Prophet (ﷺ), charges were laid a year later under section 295 of PPC. It was noted that a group of women had argued over Asia Bibi fetching/drinking water for Muslim women.* In Nov 2010, a district court sentenced her to death and a penalty of Rs. 100,000.⁶⁶ Despite her death sentences, imam of Peshawar's oldest mosque, Maulana Yousaf Qureshi, offered a reward of Rs.500,000 to anyone for killing her if the courts fail to hang her - an announcement supported by one of the Urdu national newspapers.⁶⁷

On 16th Oct. 2014, Lahore High Court upheld the verdict of District court⁶⁸ as well as issued a stay order against possible presidential pardon.⁶⁹

*Though there is no religious prohibition on Muslims in sharing the utensils with non-Muslims, in many Muslim communities/households across Pakistan, separate glasses/plates are used for non-Muslim domestic helpers/workers. Some Muslims believe and practice this as a religious prohibition.

The then Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer visited Asia Bibi in jail, where she was in solitary confinement due to fears for her safety in the prison. Salman Taseer was accused of blasphemy by religious groups for visiting Asia Bibi and was killed by one of his bodyguard in Islamabad on 4th January 2011.⁷⁰ On 2nd March 2011, Minister for Religious Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti was also assassinated for supporting Asia Bibi,⁷¹ both killings were hailed by religious right across the country, rejoicing on social media as well as through public rallies. Despite online petitions for justice for Asia Bibi, and face book and twitter campaigns to free her, religious right have successfully sidelined the voices arguing for the re-evaluation of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. Under pressure from the religious groups the government dropped efforts to reform blasphemy laws.⁷²

Lahore High Court decision was challenged in the Supreme Court on 24th Nov. 2014, and appeal was accepted for hearing in 2015. Salman Taseer's assassin was sentenced to death and executed on 29th Feb 2016, and is revered by various religious factions who have turned his grave into a monumental shrine. Considering that the religious groups had rallied against Salman Taseer and in support of his killer, one Supreme Court judge refused to serve on the bench established to hear Asia Bibi's appeal, and later resigned for no reason, causing further delay.⁷³ The Supreme Court admitted her appeal in July 2015, and after much delay reserved its final judgment on 8th October 2018, amid security concerns, and fears that religious groups would protest causing havoc across the country. TLP has warned the judges of horrible end if she is given clemency or allowed to leave the country.⁷⁴ On 31st October, Supreme Court acquitted Asia Bibi and ordered her immediate release.⁷⁵ Religious groups led by TLP began protesting across the country, threatening the judges and asking fellow Muslims to kill the three judges,⁷⁶ called for mutiny against the army chief and demanded death penalty for Asia Bibi.⁷⁷ Social media especially twitter was used by TLP to rally support across the country as well as issue threats to public offices. Initially twitter refused a request by the government to suspend Khadim Rizvi's twitter account,⁷⁸ however, it was later suspended.⁷⁹ However, social media campaign led to countrywide protests, paralyzing the state machinery, and forcing the government to negotiate with the hardliners to end the protest, surrendering to their demands.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Social media has become an instrument of choice of not only the

disenfranchised communities, groups, minorities, and the marginalized, but also of established religio-political parties and activists of all kinds. It enables disruptions in the existing hierarchies, effectively seeking justice or manipulating the polity to further their agendas. One can argue that people living on the margins and peripheries have always experienced disruptions, however new technologies have enabled them to disrupt existing power hierarchies. It seems that social media as well as disruptive technologies have disrupted the existing hierarchies to some extent yet it has not changed the dominant public discourse. In the context of Pakistan, the apologies offered by the TLP and its supporters for “unnecessarily hurting the sentiments”, the apology offered was not regarding their thinking or the discourse employed to incite hatred,⁸¹ or disruption of public life.

Social media is merely a tool in the era of disruption that can be used for any purpose by those who have access to smart phone and Internet. As noted previously the access to new media is largely confined to urban areas in Pakistan, primarily in the metropolises of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. Yet it would be naïve to assume that the impact remains confined to these cities, as TLP protests and online campaigns have indicated that in this era of disruptions, the marginalized groups become mainstream even if for a brief period. In the cases related to Asia Bibi; the Electoral Act and the Economic Advisory Council, the religious groups have successfully transformed their influence from the social media to physical space influencing public discourse using religious idiom, supporting the status quo using disruptive technologies. While in the case of child rape and murder, the technological disruption enabled disruption of existing socio-legal order by pressurizing the state institutions but also using social media to gather evidence.

It is interesting to note that the disruptions enable religious groups to occupy streets and exercise their constitutional/political right to protest and contest elections - a tradition rooted in western democracy, while at the same time rejecting disruptions in their thinking - liberal (Western) thinking remains unacceptable to the traditionalists. These disruptions are emotive calls for emotive responses in the name of religion, amid fears of Western influence and possible change in the thinking of masses. Hence making use of social media in the era of disruptions to maintain the status quo in a way that suits the traditionalist is acceptable, while any change that disrupts their thinking is labelled as liberal/Western are unacceptable. It can be concluded that social media may have provided a new mechanism to communicate in ‘real time’, the history of Pakistan

reveals that Islamic groups as well as human rights activists have successfully furthered their agendas even before the era of technological disruptions during the 1977 elections (Pakistan National Alliance/ Tehreek Nizam-e-Mustafa) and the 1980s' (Women Action Forum). Despite recent events and cases and the entry of new players and stakeholders, it would be premature to conclude that technology has disrupted existing hierarchies and power structures across institutions, religious or otherwise.

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