

They Kill the Truth: WhatsApp Propaganda by Pakistan Tahreek e Insaaf during No Confidence Motion against Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan

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Abstract

The prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan (IK) faced a no-confidence motion (NCM), which was successful for the first time in Pakistan's history. Knowing that the opposition would introduce the NCM, he tried his hardest to avoid such expulsion from the government through propaganda tactics on various platforms. The facts were so expertly manipulated that the media was baffled by IK's propaganda techniques. IK called it illegal and tagged it as foreign-funded. The media was divided, reporting opposing and supporting IK in diverse ways. This research investigates how political propaganda is disseminated via WhatsApp (news including tweets, Facebook posts, electronic media reports, YouTube videos, etc.) and what kind of strategies were used by the influencers to influence the minds of the public.

Keywords; *propaganda, counter-propaganda, WhatsApp, Defamation*

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Introduction

Digital media has become a primary platform for information, opinion-making, and consumption of news. While it has made it easy to produce news and disseminate it within no time, no doubt it is also working as the most appropriate way of spreading propaganda and fake news. It is now used for social control by governments, political parties, and leaders for making or breaking public opinions. Different media houses in Pakistan make their own WhatsApp groups for information. WhatsApp is the most popular chat application in Pakistan with 46.2 million users in 2021³. Features of WhatsApp include; instant messaging, documents, photos, and video sharing, liking-disliking and emojis of monophily- homophily- heterophily networking, and adding and removing hundreds of participants. The app is also useful to form a group network where like-minded people can be added to create an environment of an echo chamber. Such and all other features of the app make it a cascading effect, which may be used for productive purposes or bring catastrophic violence.

Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda

Propaganda is a persuasion technique used to sway people's opinions, beliefs, and actions. Spreading rumors, ideas, or information to advance or undermine a certain institution, cause, or individual is a practical definition of propaganda. Even though propaganda has existed for about a thousand years, it has only lately matured into a scientific process that is capable of swaying an entire nation of people due to the development of technology that allows us to transmit information to a wide target (Manzaria & Bruke, 1999). WhatsApp has become one of the biggest channels of propaganda. There are certain filters as described by Chomsky and Herman (1988) that could avoid propaganda e.g., ownership, advertisers, flak, source, and fear. Since the content on WhatsApp is user-generated it is free from the owner and advertisers' control. Since the UGC does not need power sources or valid sources, the chances of propaganda and fake content multiply. Another feature of the application that makes it more feasible for disseminating misinformation, is its end-to-end encryption where chances of identifying the originator are bleak. Unlike other social media platforms, WhatsApp doesn't control sensitive content which makes it a more dangerous as well as powerful medium, especially in times of unrest (Farooq, 2018). Journalism offers viewers news-based truth about incidents whereas propaganda delivers biased information about an institution, political party, personality, or organization. (Rawat, 2017). Likewise, the media shape events and incidents through propaganda e.g., the issues from Jammu and Kashmir, the Killing of Hindus in Myanmar, the attack on the Hotel Taj, and many others are printed and broadcasted in the media in propagating form (Rawat,

³ <https://www.verint.com/blog/what-countries-are-the-biggest-whatsapp-users/>

2017). In propaganda, the news is frequently less accurate but more propagandized, and it is constantly aired, which harms how the public perceives it (ibid).

Propaganda During Imran Khan's Regime

Research reveals that the IK has used his Positive Polarity Item (PPI) 9.40% in his entire tweet regime in one year time period from 2018 to 2022 where the usage of objects with a positive polarity demonstrates his attempt to present a positive face to others (Saeed et al, 2021).

Few researchers believe that PM IK's "'Nia Pakistan (New Pakistan) is indeed a homeland or an idealized society defined by Islamist civilizations to which extreme emotions, sentimentality, and victimhood are attached" (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Victimhood is used as a tool to get public support, PPP had propagated it as an invaluable commodity because South Asian voters sympathize with victims and, more significantly, support those "who survive and fight back" (Zia, 2018)⁴. However, the PTI and superior courts lack the courage necessary to overthrow the political system that supports the military or the wealthy classes (Zia, 2018). Unfortunately for Imran Khan, the spiritual vote myth is untrue; no one votes for an impoverished, unpropertied candidate (ibid).

Kardar (PTI member) claimed that "Nach Gana was part of a wilful smear campaign against the

PTI, with religious and cultural sentiments" (Kardar, 2018)⁵. She blamed Political social media cells that have been active in disseminating false information using more than 200 social media propaganda tools (ibid). She also described in her column that vile propaganda only strengthens our resolve (Kardar, 2018). She asserted that the PTI is a formidable third force in a two-party, stagnant, sham democratic system and Imran Khan has given us strength and given us courage to confront injustice (ibid). Another claim, she also made is that We- the women, and youth are devoted to a corruption-free Pakistan with a fair opportunity for all (ibid). We want one Pakistan, not two (Kardar, 2018).

Yahya claimed that IK wishes to be the sole source of his identity as a leader of Pakistan and the PTI, where only transformation is possible (2020). According to the spatial deixis analysis, Imran Khan wishes to attain the ideological space or destination of New Pakistan, where everyone will have the 'same rights' (Yahya, 2020). This New Pakistan projection depicts a utopian society in which everything is right and there is justice, cooperation, and peace (Yahya, 2020). The deixes 'here, now, and today' signify Old Pakistan (Purana Pakistan), which represents the country's current situation (Yahya, 2020). But the future along the temporal axis is

'full of hope' that mirrors the vision of the founding father of Pakistan 'Quaid-e-Azam' in the form of New Pakistan (Yahya, 2020). (Yahya, 2020). A comparative examination

⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1393396>

⁵ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/315596-zero-tolerance>

of other leaders may yield additional elicitation of political discourse in the Pakistani context in the future (Yahya, 2020).

Literature review

In light of the difficulties in combating disinformation, Menczer examined Twitter and discovered that during the 2016 US Presidential elections, Bots and automated accounts played a disproportionate role in propagating online misinformation⁶ (2018). According to the study, misinformation-spreading bots can be identified by their “low credibility source of information, such as websites with deceptive names like USAToday.com.co; increasing the volume and visibility of a message; breaking people's trust by convincing them that real people are being deceived into spreading their message for them”, etc (Menczer, 2018). The study claims that Twitter bots are “promoting low credibility content in the first few moments, i.e., two to ten seconds before a story gets viral”, distributing information more quickly than any other source of information can (ibid). A single tweet, which may have been controlled by a human, is also amplified by bots through hundreds of auto-retweets, recurring links in recurrent messages, and targeting in extremely powerful accounts (ibid).

Research questions

RQ1. How propaganda was used as a persuasion tool during NCM by IK?

RQ2. What kind of persuasive moves were used by IK?

Methodology

The period from 2018- to 2022 was filled with the deployment of numerous propaganda strategies by the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf (PTI) govt, this study aims to diagnose different techniques of propaganda from the media discourses and the speech rhetoric before and after NCM. The research paper highlights the propaganda regime based on how the political government before and after IK's NCM used different kinds of discourses using the WhatsApp platform which may include written text, tweets, or other social media as well as electronic media discourses. “Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of language. It analyzes the use of language and patterns made in a speech or written discourse” (Siddique & Chohan, 2019, P.3). Fairclough described it as a “social practice and its prime focus is on the ways through which political and social dominance is maintained and reproduced through talk and text” (1989). For (DA) the following categories and further sub-categories are made to describe the relationship between these discourses, and the kind of message these discourses are giving whether it's implicit or explicit as described by Lynch (2005). What kind of words and phrases are used and what kind of actions are ascribed to the subject (ibid).

⁶ <https://news.iu.edu/stories/2018/11/iub/releases/20-twitter-bots-election-misinformation.html>

World Powers

IKs sloganeering against the US	v/s	US as Pakistan's long-term ally
IK claimed that the NCM: Defectors were Mouthed Billions of US dollars	v/s	He had been begging for defectors
IMF From No More	v/s	Do More
Opposition MPs Will Vote for Him	v/s	His Own Party MPs Voted Against Him
IK Illegitimately Stopped voting for NCM	v/s	His claim supremacy of Law
The IK and the NCM episode	v/s	PTI propaganda campaign
Religious Propaganda: Virtue	v/s	Amar Bil Maarooof wa Nahi Anil Munkar [Enjoining (what is) right and forbidding (what is) evil]
TLP Long march	v/s	IK controversial U-Turn

Analysis

1. World Powers

IKs sloganeering against the US v/s US as Pakistan's long-term ally

IK has demonstrated a strong desire to be the United States closest ally, but when the US did not return the same sentiments for IK, he strategically announced his anti-US sloganeering. For example, The PTI declared in March 2012 that it will implement local pre-selection meetings in various districts around the nation and conduct intra-party elections following the American style of the nomination process, similar to US primaries (Wu & Ali 2020). Also, to be eligible for the party ticket for the province or National Assembly, aspirants must take part in debates and win primary elections (ibid). And then it is seen that “fortuitous timing and an effective narrative resonated with a discontented citizenry and a relatively charismatic leader who had finally hit his stride” (Wu & Ali 2020). When it became clear that there was no chance to win the upcoming elections, the IK began to make a fuss about the political scenario. Popularly known as Cable gate/ Letter gate/ Cypher/ Diplomatic cable oriented by then Pakistani ambassador Asad Majeed, is a top-secret message b/w foreign country and can't be made public, IK by pronouncing the Cypher (Apr 8, 2022, PM IK address). At another moment, IK said that if I'll publicize this then the world would come to know the Pakistani code of such Cyphers and they would break such and all secret ciphers, and Pakistani secrets would be compromised (Apr 22, 2022, PM IK address to the nation). Before that move, in an interview “Absolutely Not” was uttered by IK in a self-arranged interview. A few videos were also brought into the media where the common US citizen(s) and media clips were given the message that IK is against the US.

The main question persists in the minds of the people of Pakistan why was the hype created over this matter when it was not possible to be revealed publicly. The PTI's propaganda cell relayed, messages and videos in abundance, that 'the US always intervened in Pakistan's internal affairs, the US agent Raymond Davis was released by the three-time Prime minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and then Pakistani ambassador to the US Hussain Haqani photos as proofs were also brought that the opposition especially Hamza Shahbaz Sharif and few of the allies had met with US ambassadors and it was established that IK knew the dates of those meetings. Hameed Gul retired army personnel tried to get into the PTI govt through his organization named (Chairman Tehreek e Jawanan e Pakistan), and he talked against the US and criticized Pakistan for being a long ally of the US, especially in the war on terror.

IK claimed that the NCM: Defectors were Mouthed Billions of US dollars v/s His own practice

Nobody is aware of the truth regarding the NCM's relationship with the defectors in the US. However, IK has successfully exploited the fragile relationship in his rallies. It is also a wellknown truth that Americans are unpopular in Pakistan due to the US's decision to support groups fighting against Pakistan in the Palestinian, Kashmir, and Afghan wars (Shaheen & Tarique, 2022). We'll see the principles of propaganda, if any, to support the claim that IK used Pakistan's social fabric to his advantage to hide his failure to govern the nation on all fronts during his four years in office from 2018 to 2022. However, it is unknown whether IK used Pakistan's social fabric to his advantage. Finally, in a nationwide large publicized 'Amar Bil Maarof rally', IK termed 'letter gate' as a foreign-led conspiracy against his regime change by pouring in billions of dollars for defecting allies' MPs (Mar 31, 2022, *Samaa tv*)⁷. • ***IMF From No More v/s Do More*** IK had previously stated that he would not visit the IMF, although he had nonetheless gone to the International Fund to obtain funding. It is pertinent to note that before tabling of the NCM by the opposition alliance- the PDM, IK had said "No more to 'Do more'" in a parliament speech (Jun 30, 2021, *ARY news*)⁸, which may be because he wanted to beg for more monetary aid from the US-backed world economic bodies.

Opposition MPs Will Vote for Him v/s His Own Party MPs Voted Against Him

The interior minister of the IK's regime, Sheikh Rasheed disclosed to the media that "12 to 13 opposition MPs will vote against the NCM" (Feb 11, 2022, *ARY news*)⁹. He had also termed the

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynAaggHMMAY>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7E07YUX00w>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjZqKgb00J0>

NCM as “adam e itmenan” [noconfidence motion]’ when the NCM was yet to be introduced, and the people of Pakistan were unsure whether the NCM would ever become a reality, despite efforts by the PDM- a coalition of opposition political groups. In the political infrastructure of Pakistan, Political authority is scattered and extremely localized. Political parties typically co-opt locally important leaders with their circle of supporters rather than establishing their organizations or garnering large-scale support (Wu & Ali 2020). And that’s why it has become the reason to get the support of electable as well as the parliamentarians of other political parties. Before 2018, IK was constantly attracting such eager birds to his party. The PTI got 155 seats in the 2018 elections, a 172-seat simple majority was required to form a government and was short of a good number of seats, and these people helped IK to form his government. From tabling the NCM to the day of voting, IK called for the PTI followers to get ready for a

Surprise’ in his frustrated speeches and addresses. IK’s information minister Fawad Ch told the nation through nationwide media that one million PTI followers/youths would be crowded outside the parliament and MPs would have to pass through the full-of-charge gathering of supporters before and after the vote of the NCM.

Meanwhile, the news disclosed that 12 MPs defected/deserted to the PDM (Mar 18, 2022, *Dunya news*)¹⁰, even if it was largely rhetorical that the defectors would have to face de-seat, which was also proved later that they were defeated by the EC (May 20, 2022, *Geo tv*, *ARY tv*, *24 news* and the national media across the country). Before defeating them by the EC, the apex court had given the ruling that the vote would not be considered by the defectors by quoting that ‘the defector party would be no more than a tea party.

IK Illegitimately Stopped voting for NCM V/S

In the keynote address by the Law minister of the IK govt, on the day of the NCM agenda, Fawad Hussain threatened the defecting MPs by asking the Speaker NA (the NA session was conducted by the Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri as the Speaker Asad Qaisar himself strategically chose to remain absent from the session) that Article 5 (deals traitors and treachery for stealing the intelligence of the country) should be implemented and defectors should be declared as traitors. He also termed the NCM as an attempt to enslave Pakistan to the US (Fawad’s NA address) (Apr 3, 2022, *Hum news* telecast from the NA). The opposition was stunned to observe that the NCM was rejected by the Speaker of the House calling it foreign treachery against Pakistan, even though no Pakistani laws were permitted to reject without a vote against or in favor of the NCM. However, then Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri read the written message bearing Asad Qaisar’s name at the end. The PDM knocked on the doors of the apex court, the same day. The Supreme Court of Pakistan, constitutionally set aside the rejection of the NCM and ordered a vote on Apr 7, 2022. The court also ordered that the session be called for at 10 am and a complete vote by 10:30 pm.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldmU7YPBlxs>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWqToEJryUY>

The PTI's government surprisingly avoided court orders until midnight, when the court had to start convening to save the Constitution of Pakistan. And at last, at midnight NCM resolution was passed with 174 votes in favor of the resolution with only a few votes for the IK's candidate (BBC). It is pertinent to note that defective members did not cast their votes.

The IK and the NCM episode v/s PTI propaganda campaign

Salim Safi, a journalist, talked about a foreign affairs interview with Hina Rabbani Khar on Mar 13, 2022, where she asserted that such cables are routine affairs by the superpower. In the total of house MPs i.e., 342, before the NCM was tabled to the secretary of parliament under Article 95 of the Constitution of Pakistan, IK's graph of popularity declined while the NS's graph was going up after 1st year of govt by IK (Mar 8, 2022, 24 news in Najam Sethi show)¹². On the other hand, PTI was squeezed due to its unpopularity over sharp price hikes of daily commodities, the highest ever petrol/fuel prices, and rampant corruption in the departments. PTI's parliamentary meeting on Apr 8, 2022, in which only 97 attended out of 155 total members, was seen as a clear defeat, and the PTI started a propaganda campaign. According to Article 63-A, no parliamentarian would cross the floor but lose his/her seat as a parliamentarian. After losing the PTI parliamentarians from its basket, the PTI opted three-fold strategy to de-seat its parliamentarians i.e., move to the EC (Election commission), to the Speaker NA (National Assembly), and the SC (Supreme court of Pakistan). As a novel strategy, however, it is seen in the court hearings the PTI's lawyer(s) remarks were based on teasing the court judges. The PTI also moved to the SC, out of the current pattern- a unique, however, that the defectors should not vote against PTI. The SC made a 5- members larger bench to define Article 63-A, for which the hearing was already going on (May 8, 2022, *Bol tv*).

According to the constitution of Pakistan Article ...?, the Speaker of the National Assembly (NA) has to decide the date of voting in a fortnight. On March 23, 2022, the Speaker of the NA prorogued the assembly Session for another 4 days. On March 27, 2022, the Speaker of the NA once again prorogued the NA Session for another 4 days till 31st of March 2022.

Religious Propaganda: Virtue V/S Amar Bil Maarooof wa Nahi Anil Munkar

Apart from the ethics, one day before the final and fateful day, IK called for a highly publicized mass rally i.e., Amar bil Maarooof jalsa/ rally, Islamabad on March 30, 2022, and exposed a mysterious secret letter or 'Threat Letter' - sir name/ popularly known as 'Letter gate' the turning point for the ugliest later events of happening in the political history of Pakistan. He didn't show the letter to anybody and called it a 'Global US Conspiracy' (Mar 27, 2022, *Samaa tv*; *Bol tv*; *ARY news*; *24 news*; *Geo news*).

Later developments showed the 'Letter' was bearing the date March 7, 2022, and was called the Conspiracy because the NCM was submitted on the 8th of March 2022, a day later. Hence, the IK propagates the dates, in terms of propaganda rather than describing his government's four years of power and performance. The developments also showed that well before this public gathering waving of 'Threat Letter', another

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd8yTMqeZUA>

letter bearing the date September 27, 2021, was written to the ambassador of Pakistan to the US by the Foreign minister of Pakistan, Pir Qureshi in which he had shown concerns that the ambassador was failed to convince President Joe Biden to talk with IK (*WhatsApp* conversation dated Apr 23, 2022). However, PM IK had visited the US to meet Trump two years before (Jul 23, 2020, *PBS news hour report*; *ARY News*). Later incidents will prove that the new US administration under president Biden however was reluctant to meet IK and the IK had shown serious concerns about this for the reasons, many several WhatsApp posts had been showing such of his concerns that IK had secured the vote of confidence with 178 votes (Mar 6, 2021, *ARY news*; *24 News*).

During the time frame of the PTI government, Pakistan witnessed the ebb of the economy, and the highest ever recorded loans were sought from world bodies since 1947. A new phenomenon of loan seeking was introduced where the loan was sought from friendly countries

e.g., the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in the name of saving the “possible bankruptcy of the country”.

TLP Long March v/s IK Controversial U-Turns

There have been numerous controversies since IK came to power, including the TLP's long march for the expulsion of the French ambassador over the photographs of Hazrat Muhammad (SAWW) that the PTI government claimed to be duplicates, India and Israel being compared to Pakistan as being more khuddar (self-determined) and self-reliant nations, and no country daring to direct, especially Indians (Televised address to the nation on Apr 8, 2022).

Conclusion

Imran khan and his party used propaganda copiously during the NCM, different persuasive techniques e.g., *name calling* which IK and his ministers did excessively for the opposition leaders another excessively used technique was a negative narrative about the other political parties, like corrupt, foreign-funded ones were used to convince the people at large that

PTI's point of view is correct. Imran Khan employed words to evoke a sense of intimacy and attachment from his audience. He used metaphors and rhetorical devices in his statements. As has been mentioned earlier that WhatsApp eases the way to propagate one's ideas and in the case of NCM it did the same. Saddique (2019) concluded that “IK's discourse consists of frequent use of nouns and verbs, Through the most frequent use of first-person pronouns, he strengthens his viewpoint successfully and succeeds in gaining the support of people”.

IK claimed that the NCM is a foreign conspiracy. By making such statements he tried to play with the religious sentiments of Pakistanis. Being Muslim foreign funding means that opposition is not reliable, not sincere with Pakistan, and above all enemies of the nation. He portrayed himself as a true Muslim, by visiting different shrines, performing Ummrahs, and reciting Darood sharif in the jalsas.

IK claimed that NCM was a US conspiracy against him, and making such a claim has certain motives e.g., seeking public empathy, proving that his government is flawless, and so forth. This kind of statement has clear propaganda elements at the time when he was becoming unpopular amongst the public. He consistently attributed the problems Pakistanis are experiencing are due to other parties, like the US and the opposition. His position and remarks are in direct conflict with one another, as seen by the media's description of Imran Khan's meeting with President Trump as "*a successful reset of the two nations*"¹³. Such introductions are propaganda techniques, and as he found himself losing control and headed for failure, he began to accuse the US and other powerful nations of conspiring against him. He employed a variety of strategies/tactics to influence the public. He always accuses his opponent of being crooked and is to blame for price increases, sugar scandals, etc. He referred to his opponents as imported governments, which shows that he frequently utilizes naming and shaming to paint others as terrible and sway the public's opinion. Imran Khan has always been a contradictory character. In the TLP march to remove the ambassador from France, he once again played a contradictory role. On the one hand, he pledged to fulfill all of the TLP's wishes, but on the other, he didn't. In a way, he misled TLP as well as the public. He often uses religion as a tool to influence the public for example he uses a slogan Amar bin maroof and nahin anil munkir and also used the word jihad (to fight for Islam) for his protests against the new government and asked his followers to come and support him it would be a kind of jihad¹⁴. His rhetoric of imported government has greatly influenced the minds of the people and there has been a steep increase after his recent speeches and tweets regarding this.

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/25/qa-was-pakistan-pm-imran-khans-visit-to-the-us-a-success>

¹⁴ <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/2022/05/25/imran-khans-rhetoric-and-the-politics-of-jihad/>

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