

Examining the Narrative Control in Pakistani Political Discourse

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: December 18, 2023 Revised: December 27, 2023 Accepted: December 30, 2023	Power shifts that are carefully planned have plagued Pakistani politics for many years. These schemes, which are frequently concealed by selective prosecutions, manipulated public opinion, and media manipulation, cast serious doubt on the validity of the nation's democratic system. This research explores the complex interplay between public consent and elite manipulation, examining the ways in which political players and the media use narratives to manipulate public opinion and eventually affect election results. With a focus on in-depth interviews with political analysts, journalists, and regular people, the research takes a qualitative approach and is based on agenda-setting theory and the hypodermic needle model of communication. Through examining the processes of story development, media cooperation, and public vulnerability, the research clarifies the intricate relationship between manipulative elites and fake consent. The results highlight the weakness of Pakistani democracy and imply that free and fair elections run by an impartial body may be necessary to terminate the cycle of coerced consent and provide people the freedom to actually exercise their right to vote.
Keywords	
<i>Hyper Reality</i> <i>Agenda-setting Theory</i> <i>Hypodermic Needle Model</i> <i>Democratic Processes</i> <i>Power Dynamics in Pakistani Politics</i>	

1 Introduction

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is Chinese intention of connecting with the world through roads, railways and maritime silk route with mainland China (Griffiths, 2017). Pakistan's political horizon is characterized by an ongoing sequence of organized power transitions, which breeds unpredictability and instability. In this complex web of governance, it is assumed by many that governments are frequently toppled by devious means that circumvent popular will, drawing harsh criticism from a wide range of stakeholders. Courts, media, and the public all fiercely oppose these changes in power, seeing them as unjust and anti-democratic. As the cycle comes to an end, new leaders show themselves to be the favorites, only to be deposed by the same evil schemes that brought down their predecessors. To shed light on the complicated power dynamics, public opinion, and media manipulation that affect Pakistani politics, this study intends to explore the complexity inherent in this phenomenon.

Examining this repeating cycle makes it crucial to comprehend the function that public opinion plays in Pakistani politics. Popular emotion, which is heightened by media outlets and political scheming, frequently serves as a trigger for the toppling of regimes in power.

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This research aims to disentangle the complex processes by which different players mold, impact, and employ public opinion to manipulate political shifts. It also seeks to disentangle how media narratives influence public perception and discourse on political events, shedding light on the mutually beneficial link between media manipulation and sentiment modification. This study aims to provide important insights into the relationship between public opinion, media manipulation, and the overall trajectory of Pakistani politics by examining these processes.

Power dynamics in Pakistani politics are an important component of this study. The goal of the research is to examine the complex dynamics of power dynamics and how they affect political transitions. It aims to reveal the complex web of alliances, rivalries, and vested interests that mold the decision-making processes and eventually affect political outcomes through a thorough examination. This research attempts to provide a thorough knowledge of the fundamental processes that sustain the recurrent cycles of planned power transfers by examining the intricate details of power battles. By doing this, it aims to clarify the complex interactions between influence and deception that characterize Pakistan's political system.

2 Research Problem

A recurrent pattern of orchestrated power transitions, characterized by selective litigation, slanted media coverage, and public manipulation, bedevils Pakistan's political landscape. This study explores the causes of this cycle, how it affects democratic processes, and possible ways to achieve true citizen-driven democratic governance.

3 Research Objectives

- To comprehend the ways in which Pakistan's political elites engineer power transitions and shape public opinion through the use of the media and legal institutions.
- To examine how the hypodermic needle model of communication and agenda-setting theory influence public opinion and justify manufactured consent.
- To evaluate how this cycle affects the durability of democracy and public confidence in political institutions.
- To investigate various means of ending the cycle, such as the function of free and fair elections led by an impartial authority.

4 Literature Review

4.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Research by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as well as other researchers indicates that the media has the power to alter the relevance of problems and prioritize them on the public agenda. This paradigm is used to investigate how public perception of specific political parties and individuals in Pakistan is shaped by media coverage.

4.2 The Hypodermic Needle Model

This communication model, which Lasswell (1927) promoted, assumes that information is directly transferred from media to audience, suggesting powerful persuasive effects. This

study investigates if this model may be used to comprehend how media-driven narratives affect Pakistani public opinion.

Research on Pakistani politics by Cohen (2004) and Khan (2012) looks at how Pakistan's democratic processes are affected by military establishments and elite political scheming. Building on previous research, this paper examines the roles played by these elements in the cyclical pattern of power transfers.

This amounts to a complex game of public domain manipulation in Pakistan, where media outlets develop and promote narratives that elevate some political actors while demeaning others. As Hasan (2015) argues, Pakistani media often serves as a spokesperson for vested interests, promoting sensationalized storylines that match with the agendas of major political factions. As Gilani (2012) points out, this skewed coverage distorts public opinion by emphasizing the failings of the current administration while ignoring those of possible successors. This inaccurate representation fosters public disenchantment and eventually opens the door for planned removals.

With its idea of direct information transfer from media to audience, Lasswell's (1927) hypodermic needle model provides another important lens through which to look at the impact of produced narratives in Pakistani politics. Although the model's oversimplified presumptions have been refuted (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), its central idea—that media can have a persuasive effect—remains true. Political players in Pakistan use media outlets to spread narratives that have been deliberately developed with the intention of swaying public opinion.

These narratives frequently use societal weaknesses that already exist, such as divisions between different ethnic or religious groups, as Jalal (2014) highlights, in order to discredit political opponents and support their own legitimacy. Media outlets infused with the objectives of political elites effectively weaponize these narratives, influencing public perception and influencing electoral outcomes through a combination of fear-mongering, disinformation, and selective framing (Zaman, 2018).

Beyond the military, strong political families and commercial interests also have a major role in shaping media environments and legislative frameworks, which reinforces the pattern of manufactured consent (Ali, 2010).

5 Research Methodology

Using a qualitative methodology, this study sought to provide deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of Pakistani politics. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by the researchers with a heterogeneous group of people who fall into three different categories: citizens, political analysts, and journalists. In order to guarantee a thorough comprehension, fifteen people, five political analysts, and five journalists were selected as interview subjects due to their varied perspectives and political acumen.

Themes like public opinion, political manipulation, media impact, and possible routes to true democratic governance were the focus of the researchers' interviews. The researchers allowed participants to freely express their opinions while still ensuring some uniformity throughout interviews by using a semi-structured technique. This methodology facilitated the collection and analysis of extensive, complex data.

A methodical strategy called thematic coding was used to assess the interview material. Finding recurring themes and patterns in the interview transcripts was part of this process. The researchers were able to obtain a thorough grasp of the many viewpoints and experiences that the interviewees shared by identifying important themes. The analytical method also sought to investigate any discrepancies or opposing points of view among the participants in order to present a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Overall, this qualitative research approach enabled a thorough examination of the methods by which political players influence public opinion, the role of media in crafting narratives, and the effects of this manufactured consent for democratic stability. Through the utilization of thematic coding and a wide range of respondent engagement, the results of this study enhance our comprehension of Pakistani politics and their influence on the democratic process.

In summary, using a qualitative methodology, this study conducted in-depth interviews with three major categories of people: journalists (five), political analysts (five), and citizens (15). The interviewees were chosen on the basis of their political competence and range of viewpoints. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with themes including public opinion, political manipulation, media impact, and possible ways to achieve true democratic governance. Thematic coding was used in the data analysis process to find recurrent themes and differences in the transcripts of the interviews.

6 Data Analysis

Several important themes emerged from the analysis. Interviewees emphasized the pervasiveness of biased media coverage, which frequently favors certain political organizations while condemning others. This is known as media manipulation. This kind of deception was used to shape public opinion and give political activities legitimacy.

6.1 Political Elites and Manufactured Consent

Through selective legal prosecutions, media manipulation, and public disenchantment with incumbent administrations, political players were found to be the architects of power transitions. This undermined true democratic choice by starting a loop of manufactured consent.

The general public acknowledged the cyclical nature of Pakistani politics and voiced a desire for free and fair elections to be held by an independent authority, even in the face of widespread manipulation.

The results of the data analysis demonstrated how pervasive media manipulation is in Pakistani politics and how it affects public perception. The media's skewed representation of political groups not only shapes public opinion but also gives some political actions an air of legitimacy. The study also sheds light on the purposeful efforts of political actors to manipulate shifts in power through media manipulation, calculated legal measures, and popular disillusionment. This undermined the legitimacy of democratic choice by continuing a loop of manufactured consent. Significantly, the results emphasized the public's demand for transparent electoral procedures, emphasizing the vital necessity of impartial supervision to guarantee Pakistan's democratic traditions remain genuine.

The frequency of skewed media coverage, which benefits some political organizations while criticizing others—a practice known as media manipulation—was one of the main themes brought up by the interviewees. It was determined that this manipulation was a tactic used to sway public perception and give political actions legitimacy. The study also showed how political elites orchestrated power shifts by manipulating the media, selectively pursuing court cases, and exploiting public dissatisfaction with ruling governments. This created a vicious circle of manufactured consent that undermined true democratic decision-making. Notably, despite the pervasive manipulation seen in the political environment, the results also emphasized the public's desires for free and fair elections overseen by an impartial body.

The data analysis from qualitative research techniques presents an unsettling image of Pakistani politics that is closely linked to media manipulation and its devious influence on public opinion and power structures. Concerns expressed by interviewees about skewed media coverage that elevates some political entities while demonizing others expose a world where "manufactured consent" is commonplace or a meticulously crafted reality created by political elites in order to manipulate public opinion and justify their goals.

The study also analyses how this multi-level manipulating apparatus functions. First, the media itself functions as a biased filter, influencing how the general public perceives, comprehends, and eventually reacts to political events. This is generally due to ownership structures or political affinities. In addition to favoring selected groups, this biased image gives legitimacy to their acts, regardless of their actual nature.

Secondly, the distorted media landscape is deliberately used by political actors to manipulate changes in power. Selective legal actions that focus on opponents while ignoring supporters serve to reinforce the desired narrative. Dissatisfaction with the current administration, which is frequently purposefully heightened by media manipulation, adds another weapon to this scenario. Political elites take advantage of public frustration and present themselves as the solution in order to manipulate a desired change in the balance of power.

Current study also highlight optimism amid the manipulation that includes the public's desire for real democracy. Their steadfast demand for free and fair elections supervised by an impartial body, in spite of the endemic prejudice, says volumes about their determination to recover their democratic agency. This ongoing demand for justice and openness serves as a counterbalance to the manipulative forces in place and presents one possible path out of the created cycle and into a more representative democratic system.

Ultimately, the data analysis provides an insight into the destructive influence of media manipulation on Pakistani politics. It reveals a system in which the deliberate interaction of a biased media, crafty elites, and manufactured discontent orchestrates power shifts rather than the genuine will of the people. The public's resolute demand for democratic integrity and openness, however, provides hope for the future. To shed light on the steps required for Pakistan to regain true democratic agency, more investigation into the causes and effects of this manipulation is essential.

In addition to the above analysis, recent statements of prominent Pakistani politicians/party heads have also been highlighted and aligned with the current research study to broaden and further justify the scope of the study:

1. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari: His foresight of Nawaz Sharif's possible "mujhy kyun bulaya" narrative demonstrates a calculated move. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari hopes to deflect attention from Sharif's ouster and onto the process of selecting leaders for the next February 2023 election by foreshadowing this victimization narrative. The PPP's battle for political domination and its opposition to the PML-N narrative are reflected in this attempt to recast the story. (Bilawal seeks full inquiry into 'serious' cipher issue - Newspaper - DAWN.COM)

2. Imran Khan: The title "ladla" that former Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and former Caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti gave him says it all. It poses major concerns regarding the impartiality of the courts in addition to implying preferential treatment inside the legal system. This story supports Khan's populist "anti-establishment" rhetoric by corroborating his claims of an elite "conspiracy" against his administration. ('Ladla' Imran Khan getting unimaginable facilities in jail, says Bugti (thenews.com.pk))

3. "Ladla" and "Electoral Engineering": Bhutto-Zardari's subtly expressed remarks about a politician Nawaz Sharif being "laaya" and "hataya" (meaning "brought" and "removed") are consistent with the larger worries about outside interference in election results. This assertion might support accusations that the "establishment" favors certain parties, casting doubt on the democracy's impartiality and openness.

4. Nawaz Sharif made a sophisticated argument based on Pakistani political dynamics when he said that his rivals in politics were manipulating the system to benefit Imran Khan. The Label "Ladla": Referring to Khan as the "ladla" suggests partiality and privileged treatment within the system of power. Supporters of Sharif, who think he was unfairly attacked in contrast to Khan, can relate to this story. It can support claims that Khan earlier had the support of the establishment, which raises questions about judicial prejudice and election tampering. According to Sharif, he is the victim of a "shameful game" that a strong elite is playing. Using this victimization story, he hopes to win people around and justify his criticism of Imran Khan. He presents himself as unfairly suffering while Pakistan bears the brunt of the fallout. (<https://humnews.pk/pakistan/why-pakistan-punished-to-bring-ladla-to-power-nawaz-sharif/>)

6.2 Consequences for Narrative Control

Bhutto-Zardari, Imran Khan, Sarfraz Bugti and both Sharif's utterances reveal a bitter struggle for public opinion and agenda-setting. Each political party tries to shape the story around its own and its opponents' acts so as to augment public support and justify their political motives. Public opinion is shaped by this ongoing battle for narrative dominance, which eventually affects the electoral environment.

7 Suggestions

7.1 Free and Fair Elections

The autonomy to choose one's own representatives is the foundation stone of any true democracy. To achieve impartial, transparent, and credible elections, Pakistan needs an independent Election commission that is not influenced by any political or hidden players. While such an independent panel is being created, monitoring and expertise might be sought from impartial international agencies.

7.2 Judicial Reforms

The legal system must be unbiased, neutral and free from political interference or meddling by hidden players. By implementing reforms like accountability systems and transparent selection procedures, our political landscape can strengthen judicial freedom and prevent the use of the legal system as a political tool against rival politicians.

7.3 Media Independence

It is integral to have an independent and vigilant media in order to question fabricated or constructed narratives and hold the strong parties responsible. Encouraging media independence through legal protection, enhancing ownership diversity, and increasing journalistic standards is vital to ensuring that the public gets impartial information and is able of making well-informed decisions.

7.4 Regional Collaboration and International Supervision

Pakistan may learn from other democracies that have succeeded over hindrances like electoral interferences and political engineering.

7.5 Civic Engagement and Public Awareness

Overcoming the loop of manipulation requires strengthening and empowering the masses with information and critical thinking skills. Easy access to information, media-literacy initiatives, and civic education programs can allow citizens to identify slanted narratives and hold their leaders accountable.

7.6 Strong Democratic Institutions

Sturdy institutions extend beyond the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are essential to a healthy democracy. Encouraging media coverage, active citizen engagement, and independent civil society organizations are critical for ensuring the checks and balances required for a robust democracy and for holding those in positions of power responsible.

7.7 Handling the Underlying Socioeconomic Issues

Lack of opportunity in the economy, poverty, and inequality are typically the feeding grounds for the cycle of manufactured consent. By addressing these problems with social safety nets, economic development programs, and healthcare and education spending, we can empower people and lessen their vulnerability to political influence.

7.8 Youth Inclusion and Intergenerational Discussion

Young people's passion, vibrant nature and enthusiasm combined with seasoned politicians' knowledge and experience may be a powerful force for good. More responsive and efficient government can result from developing intergenerational communication, promoting youth engagement in politics, and incorporating a variety of viewpoints into the decision process.

In Pakistan, overcoming the loop of manufactured consent is a difficult and a complex task. But Pakistan can start to create a more authentic and full-bodied democracy, where the people actually own the power, by putting these suggestions into practice and encouraging a

culture of , inclusion, diversity, transparency, honesty, openness, responsibility, and engaged citizen engagement.

8 Conclusion

This research discusses the unrelenting difficulties in Pakistani politics, which are marked by a periodic pattern of engineered power shifts driven by selective prosecutions, media manipulation, and popular discontent. Keeping in view the agenda-setting theory and the hypodermic needle communication model, the current study provides shrewd information about how political elites and the media mold popular opinion to affect election results. According to the findings, holding free and fair elections under the supervision of an impartial organization is crucial to ending the cycle of coerced consent and enabling people to make true democratic decisions.

In conclusion, the convoluted linkage between public vulnerability, media manipulation, and power dynamics in Pakistan's political landscape determine the critical need for comprehensive interventions to ensure and sustain democratic stability. Manufactured consent has a widespread effect that feeds a power-shifting cycle that erodes public trust in political institutions and threatens the very foundation of democratic governance. Restoring genuine electoral freedom possibly by creating an impartial electoral commission in order to address this urgent issue, becomes quite integral to maintaining the values of free and free elections and resuming public confidence in the democratic process.

In addition, it is essential to maintain media independence and increase public knowledge of deception techniques. Efforts to augment media independence and advance a general understanding of the methods by which public opinion is shaped are critical to allowing citizens to make informed and intelligent choices, which in turn creates a more resilient and healthy democratic culture.

It is obvious that Pakistan's pursuit of a citizen-driven democratic government will remain a fantasy in the absence of such all-inclusive and systemic measures. Hence, it is essential to take coordinated action to support electoral integrity, improve media freedom, and encourage an informed public in order to create the conditions for a more inclusive, fair, responsible, and transparent democratic framework in Pakistan,. This need sheds light on the significance and urgency of the research's scope and findings, which outline the intricate relationship between public trust, media influence, and power dynamics in determining Pakistan's path toward democratic governance.

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