

Examining the role of social media in political change:

An empirical study of Pakistan

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Abstract:

To examine the role of social media in the political change of Pakistan is one of the most important aims of the current study. Due to the deductive nature of the study, cross-sectional technique was selected for data collection. Data was collected from the capital cities of various provinces (Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar & Lahore). In total 338 samples were collected, after deducting missing values and outliers, 314 samples were declared valid for further analysis. Majority of the respondents were young male having bachelor degree education. Data was analyzed through SPSS. The results show that overall, mean value was in between 2.3-3.92 and standard deviation in between 1.06-2.21. Cronbach alpha was conducted to examine item's internal consistency; overall reliability was found 0.81. Both hypotheses were accepted. This study finds that social media is playing significant and positive role in political change. Despite of that, the current study suggest that state should take steps in-order to check the genuineness of the information, shared through social media. Alike the other studies of social sciences, present study is not free from the limitations. Therefore, for the future researchers, it suggests longitudinal method for data collection. Additionally, broadcast as well as print media can also be examined in the future.

Keywords: Social media, Political change, Pakistan

Introduction:

Human history witnesses that 'change' is the only thing that does not change. It prevails in every society of the world, especially it is dominated in the society which desires to satisfy the public or fulfill their needs. A society requires change as it can transmit the old procedures into new one (Nworah, 2005). The world has seen different kinds of changes or shifts. These shifts might be; from rural to urban, agriculture to industries, regions to states, dictatorship to democracy and north to south. These changes have been observed in almost every aspect human life such as;

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economy, living style, education, culture, politics, behavior, attitude, family structure and many more. Pakistani society has also witnessed these changes since independence but the irony is that, the common man has not been benefited completely by all these changes due to the chronic restrictions by the state authorities.

The changes in political process are simply known as political change. It is a modification or variation in any facet of political form, process or pattern. Besides, it is the variation in conducts and established process of political web or relations (Lauer, 1982). It is argued in the literature that political change is a fundamental shift in the political structure which is already established. According to Olagbaju (2015) there are numerous factors which affect political change but the most prominent are human inter-action (communication) and level of patriotism in leadership. Language or people's contact are also considered essential for political change because it is a compound of commitment and co-operation of all those who are beneficiaries of this change. Pakistan's life is a multitude of political change. The variables which are affecting political change in Pakistan might be internal as well as external. Social scientists and international research institutes have examined these changes through various variables like; fragile democracy, poverty, ethnic issues, military dominance, education, economic crisis, lack of contact with international community, political participation, lack of public trust and many more. Existing literature suggests that since last decade, social media is playing a significant role in changing the political patterns in Pakistan. Before going in detail, we must understand the term "social media" and conditions of media in Pakistan.

Conceptualizing the Term Social Media:

Term social media defines an informative and social platform that consists on different webs, technologies and applications. It facilitates people to connect each other online (i.e. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.). This rapid emergence of social media has started scholarly debate about the consequences and impact of social media on human attitude, behavior and actions. Globally, social media is playing a dynamic role in organizing the public, against any unhappy incident or government policies. It invigorates the social movements and shares the uncensored information among public. During the last decade, it is playing a fundamental role in changing the scenario of various societies. Notably, election protest in Iran 2009, political revolution in Moldova 2009, Haiti earthquake 2010, where social media played a marvelous role in connecting and uniting the people in the conditions of crisis. Additionally, the role of social media also got attention during the recent Arab uprising and military failure revolt in Turkey. Besides, in the general election of Singapore (2011), Pakistan (2013 and 2018) and presidential election (2016) of United States, the platform of social media was widely used by different political parties. Further, it is used to get authentic and quick information about any happening and location of hospitals during any dangerous situation. This tool is increasing awareness among the masses to help or condemn any action or cause. Sheedy (2011) claims, for the first time in human history, everyone became a journalist. Notwithstanding,

this mean of communication remains contentious since its birth, because authoritarian rulers, governments and institutions have tried to curtail the freedom of social media or sought to regulate or control this platform whenever it threatens to their status quo or lead a debate about the malfunction of institutions, corruption and transparency. Social media is facing different kind of limitations and hurdles in the various regions or states of the modern world such as; Burma, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia and many other countries. Following section briefly highlights the woeful plight of the media in Pakistan.

Status of Media in Pakistan:

Islamic Republic of Pakistan was created as a democratic state but the parallel fact is that democracy remained fragile in the state. More than forty years' military directly or in-directly ruled the country. During the entire military regime, media remained dormant and strictly controlled by the government authorities. Military rule not only violated human rights and democratic values but media freedom was also curtailed brutally. Many journalists were killed and imprisoned. Additionally, government suppressed several pro-democratic and social movements.

The status of media shows how the youth in a time of globalization and modernization strived to find their identity and notion of citizenship, freedom of expression and social interactions that is not only technological but constitutional right of them.

All broadcasting and daily newspapers were directly or indirectly censored during military regime, other publications had to get approval prior to be published.

During last decade, non-governmental group, civil society and media institutions to groom up gradually in Pakistan. Soon after the emergence imposed by Musharraf (the then President of Pakistan) in 2007, media saw a potential change during the entire movement launched for the independence of the judiciary. Over the time, this sector strengthened itself slowly and gradually for the greater freedom of expression. Media landscape in Pakistan has become stronger with the introduction of mobile phones and internet. Although majority of the population in Pakistan taking advantages of the social media but the rural areas of the country are still waiting for media penetration and internet access. The civilian government is pledging to wash away these hurdles within couple of years. Despite of the fact, there are visible and durable barrier are present in the way of social media but the youth in urban areas of the country prefers social media to express their ideas and to share information. Besides youth; this platform is also providing due space to the journalists, organizations, government ministers, public figures, celebrities and those who have internet access. Published literature suggests that social media has become mainstream platform where broader range of topics are being discussed by the public more openly than ever. Brooten (2016) declares this as a positive and significant change in the Pakistan's society but he also expects from social media to fulfill the remaining gap between civil society and media.

This paper is an attempt to examine the role of social media in political change. In the upcoming section extensive literature review has

been given, which highlights the role of social media in modern world and the importance of this tool of communication, followed by research methodology and data analysis. In the end, findings and suggestions of the study are described.

Review of Literature:

The term “political change” has an immense umbrella to comprehend the fundamental and civic outcomes. These outcomes are the result of growing awareness, behavioral change, increased understanding, participation and change in policies that are constituted to provide justice. It starts from the individuals and engulfs groups, institutions, community and finally, the entire society colored by it. Political change has been examined in every time and in every region of the world. Existing literature witnessed that there are many factors that may affect political change. According to Olagbaju (2015) it appears through the contacts of language and culture with other societies. He further explains that with the contacts of two or more than two societies, their cultures, languages, beliefs and values are exchanged. Some time a society left its impact to the others and some time it borrows different traits from others. Dike (2008) defines that the change is totally dependent on the way in which leader mobilized the resources. Likewise, it is the public attitude towards change that brings the change in the society (Bhattacharyya, 2015). Adversely, Lauer (1982) argues that the change cannot be occurs through one factor but many variables involves into it. According to the findings of his study, social structure, cultural factors, values and attitudes, population change, procedural norms, technological factors and physical environment are the main factors which bring political change in the society. On another place Olagbaju (2015) declares language as the powerful and unique tool behind this change. In addition, he says it is the language that exposes different cultures and norms of the society. Besides, many social scientists claim that industries and technology is playing vital role in political change (Zhuo *et al.*, 2011). Social communication technology enables people across the world to connect and create their independent communities from their own location (Harasim, 1993). The social community which is developed through social media is far above from the geographical sphere (Meyrowitz, 1985). Social media helps people to mobilize and coordinate, it has changed the way of communication and it engage people in religious, political, economic, cultural, entertain mental, and social dialogues (Seib, 2008). It was the social media and modern communication technology which fueled the uprising in Northern African countries (Seib, 2008; Campbell, 2011). The power of social media can be measured through the actions embattled leaders took against it during the Arab uprising (Zhou *et al.*, 2011). Social media is a tool of “interaction between social context, political purpose and technological possibility” (Gillan, *et al.*, 2008: 151). The platform of social media is helpful in connecting many-to many, many-to-one and one-to-one. Additionally, the ability of social movement can be increased through social media by linking one movement to other organizations and in the result a wide network of the people developed (Akashraj *et al.*, 2014). This newly generated platform of social media is not only to share the information or

connect the people but this is a vibrant weapon to defend the ideology and it can be used against the ideological enemies as well (Jordan and Taylor, 2004). Numerous researchers find social media as a strong factor for political and regime changes. The histrionic impact of Panama Leaks and Wiki Leaks in world politics, Tahrir Square, occupy movement, usage of social media in recent election campaigns in Malaysia are the significant example of the role played by social media in political change (Shirky, 2011; Jones, 2011; Anderson, 2011; & Harb, 2011). The link between politics and social media was also examined by Kasoma, (1995) and Fiske, (1996). Many researchers like; Ito, (2010); Livingstone, (2008); Knobel and Lankshear, (2007); Jenkins *et al*, (2006) and Prensky, (2001) argued that there is a strong link between the behavior of the young and social media. The political interest among the young has been increased with the advent of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikis, Blogs etc. (Loader, 2007; & Jenkins *et al*, 2006). Hence, it is apparent in the published literature that social media has a strong connection with the behavioral, political, social and cultural change. Van Laer *et al*, (2010) opine that it was the social media that informs outside the world about the brutalities, ethnic crises, and undemocratic norms of the isolated Burma.

Contrarily, many studies find negative impact of social media on the attitude of the young and social norms. According to Sheedy (2011) the information which is being spread through social media is lacking the authenticity. In other words, it can be say that rumors or misinformation is mainly spreading through social media. In this way, numerous social scientists praise the ability of social media to connect and reach masses across the globe, but they are not fully satisfied with the ability of social media that compels people to take action. This argument is not new, Lazarfeld and Merton (1996) finds that social media is a major cause which aware the people about a particular topic or subject but no any action is being taken practically. They further argue that no political change is developed by the social media but it helps to apply the existing values in the society. Likewise, others find minimal effects of social media in society. According to their argument, political change comes on the ground by the people because it needs strong social and political ties, while social media create merely weak ties (Gladwell, 2010).

According to the theory of ties (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1365) weak ties can help friends to transfer knowledge and to find a job, while these are only strong ties, in which people can trust each other. Strong ties affect; emotions, desires, feelings and it unite people in a time of crisis. The claim of strong and weak ties is rejected by McPherson *et al*, (2015). According to the findings of their study, it is not about strong or weak ties, it is all about availability and access. They further argue that there are so many people around the world that have no one, whom they discuss and share important matters as well as their personal feelings. This argument is supported by Mainwaring (2011), he claims social media minimize the barrier of activism and it provides a platform where people can exchange their thoughts and ideas easily and openly without any kind of state limitations. The effect of this platform is much important for society. Shirky (2009, p. 23) defines the effect of this communication tool in this way, "social media provides group action that gives human society its

particular character, and anything that changes the way groups get things done will affect society as a whole". Akashraj (2014) opines that the coming decade is very important for human society as well as nations.

Thus, the impact of social media on political change varies from state to state or region to region, it may be due to the socio-demographic difference, different facilities and access to internet. No doubt social media is a transparent mood of communication but it is difficult to say either it has positive or negative impact on political change. Therefore, the idea to examine the role of social media in political change has been chosen. The researcher claims, on the basis of reviewed literature that, the role of social media in Pakistan has been severely ignored.

Objectives of the Study:

This study objects to investigate;

- 1) The role of social media in political change in Pakistan
- 2) The impact of social media in the society of Pakistan

Hypothesis:

H1: There is significant and positive role of social media in political change.

H2: There is significant and positive impact of social media in society.

Research Methodology:

Data was collected through cross-sectional survey method. For that an instrument was adopted from the existence literature of the domain. Literature witnessed that, to measure the impact, human behavior and attitude, deductive method is authentic one (Lianjiang, 2013). Therefore, deductive method was adopted in this study.

Survey Instrument and Sampling Procedure:

As it is already described, a close-ended instrument for data collection was adopted not developed. The questionnaire was developed online by the researcher which consists of five point Likert scales. In order to make the questionnaire more understandable, simple language was used. Data were collected through personal visits and mail services. Capital cities of the various provinces of Pakistan were selected due to their multi-cultural population. At the main page of the instrument, respondents were informed about their voluntarily participation. They were also informed that they can withdraw from the survey whenever they want. Out of total distributed questionnaire only 338 questionnaires were returned back. The received data was analyzed through SPSS 24.0 for windows.

Data Analysis:

Demography of the Respondent:

Demographic results of the study show that out of 338 respondents, male participants were in majority 67.16% (n= 227) and

participation of the female respondents was in minority 32.84% (n=111). In respect of the age of the participants, results highlights that the young people have 21- 40 years of age were in the majority 72% (n=244) while the second largest participation was of those people who were in between 41-60 years 18.12% (n=18). The minority of the respondent were above 60 years 9.88% (n=33). In regard to the educational background of the respondents, it was found that majority of the respondents have bachelors' degree 58.57% (n=198), participants who have masters' degree were the second highest majority 26.33% (n=89) while 13.90% (n=47) of the respondent have not even bachelors. The minority of the participants were those who, having M.Phil./PhD degree 1.18% (n=04).

Data Cleaning:

Before conducting factor analysis, missing values and outliers were cleaned through (SPSS) version 21.0. Out of 338 samples, seven (7) were removed as they were not completely filled. Moreover, Mahalanobis's distance test and standardized z score tests were performed in-order to detect the outliers (uni and multivariate) (Hair *et al.*, 2006). In the results of these tests, seventeen (17) samples were detected as their standardized z scores was ($\pm \geq 2.5$), outliers (extreme and mild) and D^2/df value transcend 2.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). After that, 314 samples were declared valid for further analysis.

Descriptive and Reliability Assessment:

To investigate participant's response and trends, different statistical tests were performed. The results reveal the mean value in between 2.3– 3.92 and standard deviation in between 1.06–2.21. Cronbach's alpha was conducted in-order to examine item's internal consistency. The overall reliability was noticed 0.81, which is, according to George and Mallery, (2003) is an excellent one. Additionally, factor's individual reliability was also satisfactory.

Hypotheses Testing:

Pearson's correlation test was used to examine the relations and impact of variables. For *H1* result found ($r=.356^{**}$) (see further; table: 01). Pearson's correlations results suggest that there is significant and positive role of social media in political change. Therefore, *H1* was accepted. For *H2* result was ($r=. 367^{**}$) (for detail; table: 01). The results highlights that there is significant and positive impact of social media in society. Hence, *H2* was also accepted.

In short, two out of two hypotheses were accepted. Table: 02 below, extensively describes the hypotheses testing.

Table: 01 Pearson's Correlation

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 SOCH	---					
2 SOME	.349**	---				
3 SOCI	.359**	.449**	--			
4 AGE	.199*	.340**	.299**	--		
5 GEND	.419**	.399**	.290**	.038	--	
6 EDUC	.360**	.519**	.490**	.319**	.037	--

Note: SOCH= Social change; SOME= Social media, SOCI= Society, GEND= Gender, and EDUC= Education

Table: 02. Summary of Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Description	Result
<i>H1</i>	There is significant and positive role of social media in political change.	<i>Accepted</i>
<i>H2</i>	There is significant and positive impact of social media in the society.	<i>Accepted</i>

Conclusion:

In-order to examine the role of social media in political change in Pakistan, this study was conducted. This was a deductive study in which, data was collected on cross-sectional survey design. The results suggest that majority of the respondents were male (67%), in regards to the age, results reveal that majority was of young respondents (72%) in between 21-40 years. Those who have bachelor degree were in majority (58.57%) when analyzed about the educational background. Out of total 338 samples 314 were finalized for further analysis after examining the missing values and outliers. Overall, mean value was found in between 2.3-3.92 and standard deviation in between 1.06-2.21. Cronbach alpha was conducted to examine item's internal consistency; overall reliability was found 0.81. Both hypotheses were accepted.

The study finds that there is significant and positive impact of social media on political change. Social media platform is free from the state's censorship and prior checking. Due to these characteristics, it attracts majority of the youth to avail the opportunities, social media is providing.

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