

Broadcasting the Dharna: Mediating “Contained” Populism in Contemporary Pakistan

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In late 2014, a political protest of unprecedented scale and duration took hold of the capital city of Pakistan. Local television news channels devoted much of their airtime to the four-month-long spectacle, showcasing how the effects of an independent media still negotiating the boundaries drawn by an authoritative military shapes the ways in which mediated populism can manifest itself. In analyzing the media discourse surrounding the protest, this article focuses on how the Pakistani liberal narrative on the transformation of the political mediascape turns most anxiously on the specter of populist politics, particularly on the illiberal nature of such figurations. In a time of increasing academic inquiry into the emergence of non-Western models of democracy, this article examines how the mass mediation of political imaginaries in Muslim-majority Pakistan is both constitutive of and produced by the growing economic might of nonliberal new middle classes.

Keywords: television, news, politics, Pakistan

On July 29, 2016, an episode of the Al Jazeera English news program *Up Front* included a segment where the show’s host, Mehdi Hasan, interviewed Imran Khan, the founder of a Pakistani political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Maintaining his well-known, fast-paced debating style, Hasan pulled no punches:

Mehdi Hasan: You’ve been accused of being soft on the Taliban, of being linked to the Taliban, and some of your critics have even dubbed you “Taliban Khan”—because in the words of the Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida, you have “mainstreamed extremism.” It’s an allegation even in the West, in the outside world, we hear more and more that Imran Khan is soft on the Taliban, that he distinguishes between good and bad Taliban. What’s your response to such criticisms?

Imran Khan: The phenomenon of Taliban has to be understood, there were no militant Taliban in Pakistan when 9/11 took place. There were no militant Taliban in Pakistan right up till 2004. The militancy started in Pakistan when Pakistan Army went into our tribal areas . . . and there was collateral damage. We didn’t have ideological Taliban as a

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Date submitted: 2016–12–12

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movement. This was a reaction to the Pakistan Army seen as going into these areas at the behest of the Americans to root out al-Qaida.

Mehdi Hasan: People would say you're very good at analyzing the subject, you're very good at understanding the problem, but you don't condemn it as much as other people.

Imran Khan: [exasperated sigh while shaking head] This is absolute nonsense. It's just not true. All you have to do is look at my statements for the past 10 years. Any bomb attack, every human being would condemn where innocents are being killed . . .

Mehdi Hasan: Do you consider the Taliban to be a terrorist group?

Imran Khan: [raises both hands to frame his face, taking a physically emphatic stance] Yes. There are—yes, yes, yes. Yes, they are [short exasperated laugh]. Anyone who kills innocent people are terrorists!

The exchange continues in this tone, with Mehdi Hasan asking pointed questions and Imran Khan defending himself from the "liberal" accusations of his "illiberal" sympathies. The evident exasperation on display signifies both Imran Khan's strategy to emphatically deny claims of sympathizing with the Taliban during an interview for an English-language news program with an international audience as well as an irritation of having to state a seemingly obvious stance on the notorious militant group. However, for viewers familiar with Khan's political maneuvering, and his party's recent considerable electoral gains in a rapidly urbanizing Pakistan, such "obvious" statements were to be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, Mehdi Hasan's line of questioning draws directly from liberal news sources within Pakistan that have contributed to developing a narrative of suspicion when confronting religiously conservative political candidates. While this concern may often be warranted, the failure to contextualize liberal anxieties in Muslim-majority publics results in both a limited understanding of the mass mediation of populist rhetoric in such environments as well as a regurgitation of a colonial-esque lexicon in addressing the masses.

In this article, I draw on English-language Pakistani news media commentary to examine the ways in which the threat of illiberal extremism in Pakistan both feeds and emerges from a global media discourse, with a particular focus on the political-celebrity figure of Imran Khan. Through an analysis of the media commentary on the four-month-long dharna protests carried out by Khan's party in Islamabad in 2014, I argue that the Pakistani liberal narrative on the transformation of the political mediascape turns most anxiously on the specter of populist politics, particularly on the illiberal nature of such figurations. In a time of increasing academic inquiry into the emergence of non-Western models of democracy, this article examines how the mass mediation of political imaginaries in Muslim-majority Pakistan is both constitutive of and produced by the growing economic might of nonliberal new middle classes.

A growing set of literature in communication studies has sought to shed light on media transformations in transitioning democracies (Alhassan, 2007; Hughes, 2006; McCargo, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Waisbord, 2000; Wasserman, 2011; Zhao, 2012), effectively arguing against applying broad brushstrokes of developments in Western modernity as a global rubric. As noted by Paula Chakravartty

and Srirupa Roy (2013), a focus on contextual specificities of regional media developments pays attention to the diversity and complexity of emerging media systems as well as their relationships to democratic practices. In their call to push “beyond the West,” these scholars insist that prevailing theories of media privatization and commercialization cannot account for the distinctive architecture of media systems in regions as diverse as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In the case of Pakistan, privatization of the electronic media resulted in a transformed mediascape, with more than 100 television channels now operating after several decades of state television monopoly. While such rapid expansion appears similar to the staggering growth of the media systems of its regional neighbors, media liberalization in Pakistan should be understood in the context of its emergence, its reactionary phase, and, as I will describe later, its constrained relationship with the state.

A Dictator Sets the Media Free

Authorizing a military coup in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf joined the list of “successful” military generals that had overthrown elected governments in Pakistan, eventually adding nine years to the nation’s previous experience of over two decades of military rule. The Musharraf regime capitalized on the general’s strategic role in the international media after 9/11, positioning him as a liberal figure toward Western political allies—promoting ideals of modernity, tolerance, and democracy. A crucial policy that helped legitimize his regime was his approach of “enlightened moderation” against the vilified face of Islamic extremism. In 2002, Musharraf liberalized the electronic mass media, ending an era of suppressed television news being delivered solely by the state-owned channel for over 30 years. While his liberal reforms were hailed by many civil society activists as progressive (Zaidi, 2008), such approval exemplifies the liberal elite tendency in postcolonial contexts to favor thinly veiled forms of authoritarianism as long as it is secular in nature—with the military control of Egypt after the revolutionary Arab Spring serving as a prominent regional example (Aziz, 2016). Indeed, in such scenarios, it is important to note, as Sahar Shafqat (2017) has done, that political liberalization is, in fact, distinct from democratization and involves an easing of civil liberties restrictions *within* the framework of authoritarianism (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Stepan, 1988).

A privatized electronic public sphere was nevertheless welcomed in Pakistan as an important feature of a modernizing society, and newly acquired independent news channels were put to the test during the 2007 civil movement that demanded an independent judiciary and the return of civilian rule, raising the stakes for the significance of a vibrant media presence. After Musharraf’s fall from grace and his eventual resignation to avoid impeachment, the lilted return to democracy in Pakistan appeared in the reshuffling of the usual suspects. Poised to win the 2008 elections and return for a third tenure, Pakistan’s first woman prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated in late 2007. The party she inherited from her father, the People’s Party of Pakistan (PPP), came into power, and Asif Ali Zardari, her husband, was elected president in 2008. Notoriously known as “Mr. Ten Percent” for skimming off of his wife’s government contract deals in the 1990s, Zardari’s government could not retain its hold on voters after five years of political scandals and corruption charges highlighted by a hyperbolic media. The PPP bowed out in the 2013 elections to make way for the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, with Nawaz Sharif returning as prime minister, a position he had held twice before in the early and late 1990s. The 2013 elections were unique in their significance as the first transition of power between elected civilian governments in

Pakistan's history, but these elections will also be noted for the remarkable rise of a serious contender to traditional political parties, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf ("Movement for Justice"), a party spearheaded by a celebrated national icon, Imran Khan.

Naya Pakistan: The Rise of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf

Although the PTI had been attempting to make political inroads since 1997 without much success, it was never before afforded the kind of massive public attention granted to it in the elections of 2013. In this article, I am interested primarily in the ways in which English-language news commentary positioned Imran Khan and his political party in two identifiable phases: The first stage was cautiously optimistic; the first wave of commentary commended the *Kaptaan* ("Captain," Imran Khan's moniker) for managing to tap into a diverse range of previously apolitical voters, including middle-class women and young professionals. The second stage involved a blistering vilification of his political strategies, now labeled as a form of "bourgeois populism" after his party launched massive protests in 2014.

Before I examine both of these phases to present my argument, it is important to understand the complicated appeal Imran Khan holds as a public personality in Pakistan for both his supporters and detractors. An ex-cricketer who captained the national team in their Cricket World Cup glory of 1992, Khan was enshrined as a beloved figure for much of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in a public imagination charged with religious-like fervor of the colonial sport. Khan's Oxford education, his playboy persona, and his marriage to a British socialite cemented his sociability ranks in the upper-class circles of liberal Pakistani privilege. These latter credentials limited his ability to push his political career forward in the late 1990s, and he spent many years reaffirming his born-again Muslim-ness before he was able to capitalize on the tried-and-tested platform of combining nationalism and religion. Pakistan's history is replete with politicians and military dictators using this powerful combination to further their careers, and Khan's eventual arrival on this popular platform coincided with the aftermath of 9/11 and the enraged sentiments of a nation that saw the ceding of its sovereign airspace to U.S. drones.

Max Weber's famous formulation of legitimate types of authority has been often used by theorists looking to understand the political rise of historical individuals across cultural contexts. Indeed, Imran Khan fits most appropriately on charismatic grounds, as Weber (1978/2013) defines it:

The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such, as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a "leader." . . . What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples." (p. 241)

The fortuitous effect of the timing of Khan's party building momentum to coincide with the changing media landscape in Pakistan cannot be understated, because it allowed the PTI to establish itself as both a media-savvy party and one attuned to the concerns of a disaffected urban middle class. Campaigning for

an end to official corruption and promising to reject American aid, Khan declared that he would stop CIA drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal frontier regions and bring peace talks with militants. As the outsider-savior, his lofty ambitions electrified prime-time television and managed to appeal to a rapidly urbanizing class of Pakistanis who could envision his techno-bureaucratic solutions as a cure for the country's problems.

Indeed, the public platform provided to Khan resembled the nearly unanimous media support and coverage afforded to the 2011 anticorruption movement in India. Led by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal, the largely urban movement employed the classically populist language of the *aam admi* ("common man") combating the predatory "political classes," demanding legal accountability in governance and a new culture of "clean and transparent" politics (Roy, 2014; Sitapati, 2011). The anticorruption movement's enabling relationship with the Indian media resembled many contemporaneous social movements in other parts of the world, including the Arab Spring uprisings or the various Euro-American Occupy movements, as noted by Chakravarty and Roy (2015), despite the "substantial divergence of its sociological constitution and of the normative import of its actual political claims as an essentially status quo-ist sociopolitical formation" (p. 315).

My focus in this article on Imran Khan's mediatized rise to prominence is not intended to pursue a chain of causality, nor is it meant to outline a middle-class politics peculiar to South Asia. Rather, against the backdrop of what Francis Cody (2015) has called a "postcolonial publicity," I am interested in contextualizing both the appeal and the distrust that Khan attracts in contemporary Pakistan to better situate how certain elements that are seen as "deviation, failed replication, or crisis from a liberal normative perspective . . . can be brought closer to our understanding of democracy in the age of deep mediatization" (p. 52).

Connecting to the Urban Middle Class

The established use of the Internet as a publishing platform in contemporary news journalism across the world from roughly 2000 to 2005 resulted in a widely acknowledged transformation of the news industry through digital media practices (Boczkowski, 2009; Boyer, 2010; Boyer & Yurchak, 2010; Gursel, 2016). With the emergence of Pakistan's privatized mediascape in the same era, almost all major news outlets launched online editions of their newspapers, as well as live streaming and recorded episodes of television broadcasts. Government reports at the end of 2015 estimate Internet density at about 13%, but the number of high-speed mobile Internet connections is reported to have passed 21 million. Campaigning on a slogan of "Naya Pakistan" (A New Pakistan) in the run-up to the 2013 elections, Imran Khan's social media team was eager to mimic Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, which used social media to reach younger Americans, and PTI was the first Pakistani political party to conduct a Google Hangout with its leader—managing to get the hashtag #HangoutWithIK to trend on Twitter in late 2012. Today, PTI's followers and fans on social media websites reflect a humble yet notable traction with online users: Imran Khan's Twitter profile has 4.71 million followers, and the PTI Facebook page has 4.91 million likes. The novelty of using online media as a campaigning tool for a Pakistani election was largely met with suspicion by political analysts who scoffed at the idea and dismissed the potential for a mostly English-user medium to affect a largely illiterate population whose voting patterns reflected *biraderi*, or clan-based, political

affiliations. Political participation for much of the electorate across the country has traditionally rested along ethnic and tribal loyalties, so the very fact that a political party was reaching out to an online minority allowed PTI to claim resonance with an aspiring urban middle class.

The emergence of PTI as a political party running on a Westernized yet anti-American platform is, at first glance, seemingly emblematic of the ways in which Margaret Canovan (1999) has described one of the structural characteristics of populism:

Popular mobilization against the political and intellectual elites, implies not only a direct, simple, style but also a characteristic mood. Populist politics is not ordinary, routine politics. It has the revivalist flavor of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena. (p. 6)

While Canovan notes that her focus is on populist movements within “mature, well-established democratic systems” (p. 6), I am primarily interested in the ways in which Imran Khan’s perceived populist rhetoric, amplified during his 2014 protest, continues to be portrayed in both local and international media as not simply irresponsible but dangerous to a fragile democracy. If populism accompanies democracy “like a shadow” (p. 16), what kinds of anxieties emerge from the threat of this looming shadow, one that precedes its supposed stable form?

“Container” Politics: The Unfolding of a Media Spectacle in the Red Zone

On September 1, 2014, transmission services for the government-owned channels Pakistan Television (PTV) and Pakistan Television World had been halted. For a short half hour, Pakistani viewers were left wondering whether yet another military coup was under way. But while the tradition of seizing state broadcasting infrastructure surely reminded citizens of military takeovers, this time it was not the sound of army boots storming the premises. Instead, hundreds of protestors from two political parties, PTI and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) had breached the state television headquarters, destroying equipment and vandalizing state property. Army troops eventually did arrive at the premises, but only to clear out the building and restore transmission.

This incident was not an isolated act of rioting protestors. It took place amid a much longer drawn-out confrontation between these political parties and the sitting government. The combination of two parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Awami Tehreek, both headed by charismatic leaders and both with distinct grievances with the government, pulled together hundreds of thousands of people to a common site. Known as *dharna*—a nonviolent mode of protest popularized in colonial and postcolonial India—this kind of political action takes the form of an aggrieved party sitting at the offender’s door until justice is received. For 126 days, the longest record of protest in Pakistan, Imran Khan’s PTI and its supporters culminated their Azadi March (Freedom March) by occupying the Red Zone in Islamabad—a generally secure and sensitive site surrounding the Parliament House in the capital city—demanding an independent inquiry into the rigging allegations of the 2013 elections and ultimately calling for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s immediate resignation. Although the PAT supporters left the protest site after 67

days, the PTI was adamant in its demands and continued the dharna on its own, drawing larger media scrutiny to what was appearing to be an ineffective bargaining tool.

Between August and December 2014, tens of thousands of supporters gathered daily to listen to fiery speeches, delivered to the crowd from the top of shipping containers, hastily made into stages. While the presence of large metal shipping containers outside the premises of shipping ports and industrial sites is almost always associated with security blockades in urban centers of Pakistan, the use of such containers in the dharnas symbolized the ability of a popular political party to breach those security measures. Often referred to as the “container dharna,” the English news commentary on these protests was usually a mixture of disdain and grudging acknowledgement. The leading English newspaper, *Dawn*, frequently published opinion pieces by analysts charting the progress of the protests. Consider the following words by the Secretary General of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, I. A. Rehman (2015):

The container dharna reinforced the model of elite-dictated discourse. The dharna leaders posed as messiahs, spoke down to the people from raised pulpits and presented oversimplified answers to the country’s endemic crisis. . . . However, the dharna also made some positive contribution to Pakistan’s politics—electoral fraud, corruption, indifference to the rights and interests of women, labour, peasantry, the jobless youth, policies of a client state, rulers’ extravagant lifestyle, etc., were brought into public discourse as basic issues that merited immediate action. (paras. 6, 9)

The skepticism of “container politics” was premised on the inevitable failure to sustain popular movements of resistance and notably the populist quality of the supporters involved. As the journalist Zahid Hussain (2014) noted in his column:

Without Tahirul Qadri’s dedicated followers, the staying power of the largely young and middle-class supporters of the PTI remains doubtful. Surely, populism and the politics of agitation have their own limitations. It is one thing to draw large crowds at rallies and quite another to sustain the momentum and bring down an elected government, however inept it may be. (paras. 3–4)

It was, indeed, the marking of the PAT and its religious cleric leader Tahirul Qadri as a purer form of “faithful” following that differentiated them from PTI’s supporters, who were seen to be upper-middle-class novices, entering the political arena for the first time, trickling into the protest site after spending the day at the office, enjoying the musical entertainment provided at evening rallies. That the presence of devoted, religious masses on the streets indexes “credible” populist action speaks to the ways in which the physical public sphere continues to be imagined in the Pakistani mediascape. For his detractors, Imran Khan’s own turn to religion was seen to be opportunistic and insincere, lacking the overt transformation of what is expected from public religious figures. Instead, Khan’s routine avoidance of outright condemnation of the Taliban, his insistence on brokering peace talks with militants, and his consistent anti-American rhetoric have led his Westernized elite critics to mockingly label him “Taliban Khan.” The circulation of such criticism has certainly retained its trope within English print newspapers, and while the audiences of

these news outlets comprise a privileged minority in Pakistan, it is nevertheless noteworthy that these narratives are recirculated by international news commentary on Pakistani politics, as was illustrated by the case of Khan's treatment in the Al Jazeera interview mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Paying attention to English news commentary within Pakistan provides a glimpse of how critical narratives are managed by the state in a privatized media landscape. The failure of English newspaper organizations to either launch or sustain their counterpart English news television channels reflects the effective ways in which privatization allows market forces to mold the propagation of certain channels vis-à-vis social divisions, such as language. Advertisers were unwilling to target an elite English-speaking minority, preferring instead to cater to mass audiences now reachable through a consumer-driven electronic public sphere. The burgeoning success of Urdu-language news channels in the mid-2000s has prompted an industrywide standard of sensationalist news programming over the past decade. The state's regulatory body, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, routinely attempts to explicitly rein in aggressive news media content with monetary fines and warnings, and yet, as I explain later, it is the implicit boundaries of news coverage in Pakistan that ensure media owners and their television channels toe the line of the state narrative.

In his article titled "The Limits of Populism," Zahid Hussain (2014) noted what many pundits on television screens could not overtly say aloud during the coverage of the dharna protests—that the impetus for Imran Khan's demand for drastic change (i.e., the forced removal of a sitting prime minister through mass protest) must be either enforced by, or at least receive the approval of, the Pakistani military:

The power matrix does not seem to have changed much despite the party's rallies drawing larger crowds. The only thing that has changed is that the party has lost its only ally with Qadri deciding to take a break from his quest for revolution. Being a shrewd operator, the cleric left the field after sensing there was no hope of a military intervention to help his cause. (para. 5)

News media professionals and viewers watching at home were well aware that not only did the military have the ability to put an end to such prolonged protests but it was impossible to imagine the unique affordances allowed to both Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to occupy highly securitized avenues in the heart of Islamabad without the military's approval. The limited circulation of English print publications in Pakistan has so far resulted in a certain amount of flexibility within the margins granted to journalists by the military—consider, for example, the rumors of a military coup that were printed in a leading English news magazine, the *Herald*:

There were rumors in the air . . . there were murmurs of a coup d'état. Other than General Shuja Pasha, the former intelligence officer who is known to be a close friend and supporter of PTI Chairman Imran Khan, the other name that was repeatedly brought up was that of Zaheerul Islam, the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Allegedly, the two were conspiring to create a rift between Prime Minister Nawaz

Sharif and Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif . . . under the presumption that the dharna had the general's backing." ("General [ret'd] Zaheerul Islam," 2015, para. 1)

This kind of commentary must be understood in the context of Pakistan's volatile political history, which bears testament to the fragile civil-military relationship since the country's inception. The military reign of General Ziaul Haq in the late 1970s is often referenced as the most damaging decade of state repression, where even the term *censorship* was thoroughly censored, as documented by journalists who endured that regime. When Ziaul Haq imposed martial law on July 5, 1977, the guidelines issued to the press two days later mandated that there would be no criticism of the armed forces, nor could any news story be published that could potentially bring the armed forces into disrepute. Newspapers were restricted by law from printing any news about the armed forces that was unauthorized by the Information Ministry (Niazi, 1993). While the 2002 liberalization of the media and the popularity of private television news channels gave media organizations unprecedented power to critique civilian governments and politicians, the state-manufactured sanctity surrounding military forces remained intact. If English print publications (such as the *Herald*, mentioned above) could get away with so much as hinting at military involvement in government affairs in the post-liberalized era, Urdu news reporters were all too familiar with the fatal consequences of directly criticizing the military or its affiliates.

On April 19, 2014, one of Pakistan's most famous television journalists, Hamid Mir, was on his way to broadcast a talk show in Karachi when he was shot at six times by unidentified gunmen. Miraculously alive, Mir was rushed to the hospital for surgery, and his employer network, Geo News, reacted instinctively, allowing Mir's brother to read a statement on camera. This statement publicly accused Zaheerul Islam, the director of the nation's powerful military spy agency, of attempting to assassinate Mir to put an end to the lead anchor's increasingly vocal opposition to certain military operations. In response, competing news channels surprisingly launched a multitude of conspiracy theories against Mir and his employers at Geo, some going so far as to claim the attack was an orchestrated publicity stunt by the network itself. Advertisers dropped the news channel immediately, plunging the channel into financial loss. One month later, the Geo Network issued a rather verbose public apology in both its Urdu and English newspapers, largely addressing viewers of its television news channel but more specifically the armed forces and the military spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). A condensed version of the notice may be read as the following:

After serious introspection, editorial debates, feedback and engagement with all parties, we have concluded that our coverage immediately after the tragic and unnerving attack on Hamid Mir on April 19th was excessive, distressful and emotional. . . . This has caused deep hurt to ISI as an institution, the rank and file of the Armed Forces and a large number of our viewers. We deeply apologize hurting them all. ("Geo tenders apology to ISI," 2014, May 26, para. 5)

For viewers who had grown accustomed to watching mostly sensationalist practices of news reporting over the past decade, the objective of this particular apology was well-understood. This statement not only acknowledged the questionable style of broadcast but, more importantly, was an admission of having crossed a line long held to be taboo. Indeed, the apology issued by Geo appeared as the final act in a

much longer battle of gradually raised stakes between a civilian government and the military. This dramatic standoff, mediated through a news channel's overt allegations of the ISI's involvement in a targeted attack on their prime-time anchor, is just one example that highlights the unprecedented shifts taking place in the power dynamics of Pakistan's political and cultural landscape.

GEO News: A Marked Media Channel

The mediated confrontation between Geo News and the military preceded Imran Khan's protests in the capital by merely a few months, and the massive backlash the channel continued to receive on the political spectrum took a very physical form during the PTI dharna protests. I began conducting ethnographic research in October 2014 in Karachi, and I will now draw upon my interviews with Pakistani news media professionals to illustrate how the liberalized space provided to a deregulated media industry in current-day Pakistan turns on its compliance in maintaining a particular state narrative.

During the initial weeks of the 2014 dharna, any viewer tuning in to one of Pakistan's 40 news channels would have been hard-pressed to find news coverage of anything other than the nonstop studio airtime and on-site field coverage of the Islamabad protests. As one executive producer at Geo News exclaimed to me in disdain: "It was just ridiculous . . . they were dropping news bulletins to cover speeches. Nine p.m. was no longer news bulletin time but nine p.m. was Imran Khan's nightly speech. For almost one hundred days!" (Qasim, personal communication, January 26, 2015). Prime-time current affairs talk shows were dedicated to nightly recaps of the "container speeches" of the day, and news bulletins were full of live footage from musical rallies with detailed commentary and vox pops of dharna participants. While the constant coverage should not have come as too much of a surprise in a heavily mediated news industry, the stark contrast between a host of channels showcasing clear bias in favor of the populist protests was evident in the counterbias displayed by an infamous channel, Geo News. Reflecting on this polarity during our interview, one broadcast journalist shook her head in amusement as she recalled switching channels at the time as viewing a different country on two opposing screens: "You had one channel that was already establishing a "Naya Pakistan," and there was another channel [GEO] that had already thrown him [Imran Khan] into jail—it's insane how farfetched it was!"

Owned by the senior journalist Shakil-ur-Rehman, who inherited the country's largest circulating Urdu newspaper (*Jang News*) from his father, Geo News emerged on the newly privatized mediascape in 2002 as the brand image of one of the country's most powerful media houses. Infamous for introducing a sensationalist news reporting style to a nation that had only known terse and sober news broadcasts from the sole state television network, Geo's first-mover advantage had carried it to the top of television rankings for over a decade. Despite its notoriety for chasing mass audiences and throwing ethical caution to the wind in its quest to dominate the industry, Geo's track record on siding with the democratic process has remained consistent. According to news media professionals I interviewed, Imran Khan's dharna was seen as a national-scale distraction by "serious" news outlets and had all the telltale signs of a military hand behind the scenes to shake up a civilian government that was getting too comfortable in bypassing the army in both domestic and international concerns. "I think it had a lot more to do with the Hamid Mir fiasco, to be honest," recalls an executive producer at GEO:

Everyone discusses this within the media that this [dharna] wasn't something Imran Khan could do on his own. How did he manage to hold the capital city hostage? Nobody else can do it—you have to have some sort of knowledge that if I'm standing here on top of this container, they can't touch me. And it was true, nobody could touch him. I mean, his supporters rush into PTV, vandalize state property, you've broken stuff, there's footage of this attack, you're supposed to be going to jail for this— why haven't you been caught? Why hasn't anyone taken you to task?

(Ahmed, personal communication, February 8, 2015)

The suspicion of ulterior motives fell on both sides of the Geo/PTI divide. While Imran Khan's main motive for marching on the capital was in protest of an allegedly rigged election in 2013, his party placed a large amount of blame on Geo News for showing early nonofficial and partial results in favor of the majority party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, which went on to win the election. Claiming that the media giant was complicit in the rigging, Imran Khan thundered against Geo in his rousing speeches to his supporters, labeling them traitors of the nation and reigniting the antinationalist taunts, which by this time had been widely projected in the media following the Hamid Mir incident.

Anti-Geo sentiment was demonstrably high during the dharna, and the backlash fell largely on the low-level reporters and cameramen who bore the easily identifiable Geo logos and were sent out to cover the protests. A senior producer at Geo was wistful when she remembered her junior staff asking for a different assignment:

They'd say, "Don't send us!" because you don't know how bad the situation is. And well, the rest of the production team sitting in Karachi would say, "How bad could it be? It's great footage!" We really dismissed any real threat of reporting from a dharna—I mean it's not like your life is in danger—but I only understood when I decided to go along to cover the Lahore *jalsa* [protest]. (Mariam, personal communication, November 17, 2015)

She recounted a scene that has become a well-known story among journalists and news media professionals, when Geo's reporter Sana Mirza was standing on top of a DSNG (Digital Satellite News Gathering) van, surrounded by a sea of PTI supporters, largely young men, who were heckling and throwing bottles at her, waiting for her to fall during a live broadcast. Senior male journalists, sitting in the Geo news studio spoke directly to Mirza on-air for moral support, urging her to stay calm and composed as she wiped back tears (a clip that was replayed multiple times throughout the news cycle for that day). Trapped inside the DSNG van, Mirza's producer, Mariam, recalled feeling helpless in that moment:

We couldn't get out. We were completely surrounded by men—the van was moving, shifting by the weight of the crowd and if anyone cracked open a door, we were terrified we would be carried out somehow. The PTI organizers could never really control their supporters. I can't imagine what Fox News would do if the Democrats had done this to them at a rally. I mean, they would have probably launched their own dharna on the side. (Mariam, personal communication, November 17, 2015)

The distinction Mariam draws between the "PTI organizers" and their "supporters" is critical to understand the figuration of what kinds of PTI supporters elicit fear of a threateningly uncontrollable mob. Indeed, the fact that the PTI has managed to both build and maintain middle-class appeal rests not only with a charismatic Imran Khan but on the very public personas that represent the core of the party's organizational members—nonfeudal, urban, educated professionals, some of whom gave up lucrative careers in multinational corporations to build a "Naya Pakistan." And yet there cannot be a showing of mass support on the streets without the masses. While political parties are quick to label opposing street demonstrations as comprised of "rent-a-crowds" or "paid supporters," they are less prone to acknowledge or condemn unsavory actions of their own teeming enthusiasts. The phenomenon of zealous political supporters is certainly not new, and neither is the liberal elite denigration of such groups. However, the emergence of state alternate mass media platforms through which these groups are both imagined and visualized, on television screens and online, does call for further reflection on the politics of the visibility of crowds and their subsequent containment.

The Specter of the Masses

In the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rise to power through the formation of the People's Party of Pakistan and his successful election as prime minister was notable as the culmination of Pakistan's populist phase (Toor, 2011). Bhutto drew his ethnic support base largely from the Sindh Province, and his party supporters had earned the term *jiyaley*—denoting strength, the term refers to those people who would sacrifice themselves for Bhutto and whose passion and zealous support for the party leader would translate into gathering mass numbers in the streets as well as at the ballot box. Indeed, personalized yet hierarchical relations of political support are one of the ways in which systems of ethnic and tribal patronage ensure political participation of the bulk of the largely illiterate voting electorate in Pakistan. Against this backdrop, it is significant to note that the 2013 elections were contested with an additional platform of political campaigning—that of social media—and, as mentioned earlier, the most prominent party to do so was the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Notable for their rapid and abusive Twitter responses to any criticism of their *Kaptaan* Imran Khan, online supporters of the PTI assumed a term of their own—*insafians*. This moniker (with the English suffix *-ians* added to the party's key term *insaf*, or justice) aptly reflects the imagined demographic of online PTI supporters—as urban educated, and upwardly middle class. Positioning themselves as rational actors, *insafians'* online campaigning for Imran Khan relied on tropes that depicted traditional support for dynastic political parties (such as the PPP *jiyaley*) as uncritical and uneducated—symptomatic of the "problem of the masses" where ethnic and tribal loyalties kept returning the same corrupt political parties to power. If PTI organizers had built a social media campaign on the basis of appealing to urban apolitical voters, their media savvy strategies also enabled the mushrooming of loyal Twitter trolls. At the cost of being particularly abusive in their rhetoric, *insafians* were identifiable online by their impassioned defense of the PTI and Imran Khan wherever hashtags using these key terms could be found. Women political figures, journalists, and television talk show hosts in particular, who were the targets of such Twitter troll attacks, would often tweet demands to PTI organizers to control their *insafians*—articulating the distinction between the two—that is, that only the former could be reasoned with. If we are to read the upper-middle-class rendering of these online supporters as reminiscent of "the mob" or "the masses" (easily imagined by South Asian elites as comprised of illiterate

and rural male supporters), then we must also pause to consider the unprecedented televisual coverage of women PTI supporters during the 2014 dharna.

While news channels were seen to be providing almost unlimited airtime to the protests, the occasional focus on women PTI supporters served a specific purpose. Visually urban elements of the party's female following were highlighted by news cameras zooming in on well-dressed middle-age women sporting sunglasses and handbags, and attractive young women adorned in PTI flag colors. When approached by reporters and cameramen, women supporters would eagerly address Imran Khan directly through the camera to express their admiration for him, commenting on their favorable experience of the protests, and of feeling safe in this public setting. The framing of the PTI dharna (by its own supporters, at least) was that of "family-friendly" protests that encouraged women to physically participate in the public demand for accountability from the government. Indeed, PTI spokespeople played such scenes to their advantage when they appeared on news talk show programs, pointing to these visuals as validating both the urban middle-class appeal of their party and their distinctness from "mob politics." Predictably, news media channels were not as interested in the visuals of the many burqa-clad female protestors in the crowd, camped out in the streets with their families to support their party's leader, the religious cleric Tahirul Qadri.

This contrast follows the lack of media attention paid to the visibility of overtly religious figures prominent in the Pakistani mediascape—religious political party members, preachers, and Islamic televangelists, recognizable by their long beards and religious attire, are easily dismissed by both a liberal elite and an aspiring middle class. The former has long held figures of such orthodoxy to be irrelevant for the maintenance of the status quo, and the latter cannot rely on such groups to offer upward socioeconomic mobility. Instead, critical media commentary accompanying the politics of mediatized populism are reserved for troublingly conservative yet charismatic public figures such as Imran Khan, the classic "insider-outsider" whose privileged social position allows him to gain political credibility as a feasible savior to corrupt politics-as-usual, particularly at a time when his anti-American rhetoric is attractive to an urbanizing youth coming of age post-9/11—eager for Western technological imports while rejecting the accompanying cultural imperialism.

In this article, I use examples from English print commentary to highlight the ways in which a dismissal of the perceived populism at the PTI dharna—similar to what Ernest Laclau (2005, p. 63) has termed "the denigration of the masses"—carried with it the general complaints: accusations of marginality, transitoriness, pure rhetoric, vagueness, manipulation, and so forth. Imran Khan's rightward religious shift and the widespread appeal such a position had brought him appeared to threaten the assumed stability of the ideological class binaries in postcolonial Pakistan. As scholars of Indian mass media have observed, the arrival of mass publicity prior to political democratization in many colonial contexts is often pointed out by postcolonial elites as explaining the "in-between" time that the masses are still stuck in, justifying the liberal tendency to reluctantly favor authoritarian forms of public regulation until political maturity is achieved (Mazzarella, 2013; Rajagopal, 2001). This infantilizing discourse of power has strong resonances with Pakistan's history of multiple military coups ("the masses are not ready for democracy yet") and indeed raises the stakes for the significance of a vibrant media presence in ensuring that democratic institutions continue to be strengthened. It is precisely in the mediatized illiberal

figuration of Imran Khan and his mass of supporters that we are confronted with what Chantal Mouffe (2000) has shown to be the *contingent* articulation between liberalism and democracy. The anxiety over the implications of such contingencies takes the form of a discourse of disdain in the Pakistani English-language press, where liberals hoped an information revolution would aid a progressive public sphere via the modernizing technology of television. While this article does not attempt to outline the literature addressing alternate theorizations on forms of democracy, particularly those that lie outside the liberal symbolic framework, the aim of highlighting the emergence of news channels as significant institutional players in democracies beyond the West (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013) suggests the need for greater attention to be paid to the contextual nuances that give specific shape to the relationship between mass media and democracy.

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