“Army Uniform Is Part Of My Skin”: A Critical Discourse Analysis of ICT Growth and Politics in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses implications of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) growth on the new political discourse in Pakistan. The power play between the civil society and General Pervez Musharraf set new directions for Pakistani politics in 2007. This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of the controversy surrounding Musharraf’s attempt to continue holding the offices of army chief and president of Pakistan simultaneously. He declared “army uniform is part of my skin”. The civil society’s online participation in the political process and the street protests that resulted forced him to flee the country. The paper offers an analysis of ICT growth and politics in Pakistan and provides an understanding of how ICT growth has shaped the political landscape in Pakistan. Social and electronic media have emerged as powerful political players and have influenced Pakistani politics and policy development. This critical discourse analysis explains political changes during 2007 that are generally attributed to ICT growth. The results indicate that ICT growth plays an important role in achieving harmony, coordination, social change, justice, and transparency of government.

Keywords: Government Transparency, ICT, Pakistan, Political Discourse, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

The role of ICT (information communication technologies) in political discourse is a subject of active research. The recent anti-government demonstrations and associated political changes in Muslim countries are widely attributed to the increasing use of ICT by citizens. Governments and politicians also recognize the importance of ICT and therefore examples of the efforts to control it appear in the form of blocking of internet, cell phone, and others means of electronic communication. This paper refers to ICT as technologies that include but not limited to social media, the Internet, cell phone, modern electronic broadcast media including TV over cable networks, TV over cell phone, and IP TV. From the use of ICT in mass demonstrations after 2009 presidential elections in Iran to the use of Twitter and Facebook in Middle East and North Africa’s recent political turmoil, it is evident that ICT has a major role to play in politics.

Pakistan’s experience with ICT growth presents an interesting case. Before Iran’s presidential election controversies in 2009, before
the political changes in Tunisia and Egypt, before the unrest in Libya, Bahrain and across the Middle East, and North Africa, Pakistan witnessed the power of these technologies when Musharraf was forced to resign and flee the country by online and street protests from the members of the civil society. Apart from the fast paced development of physical ICT infrastructure in Pakistan, the increased social and political awareness along with civil society’s increased political participation is noteworthy. The language of political discussion has also evolved over the last few years which offers insights into the social and political development. From 300,000 cell phone customers in 1999 to nearly 100 million users in less than 10 years, enormous opportunities for citizens to experiment with this newly found “freedom of speech” have evolved. The analysis of the political discourse in this paper reveals that the physical infrastructure growth served as a catalyst in the social and political change. It also finds that ICT growth plays an important role in achieving harmony, coordination, social change, justice, and transparency of government.

The decision to choose Pakistan for this study was based upon a number of reasons. First, Pakistan is the seventh largest populated country and has the highest one year growth rate of ICT industry (147%) in the world, followed by Bangladesh (135%), and India (97%) (Willing, 2007). Second, a large portion of the population in Pakistan lacks access to basic ICT needs such as reliable electric power, and infrastructure. The cost of traditional ICT infrastructure, devices and services is significantly high and, therefore, the government has pushed deregulation policy with enabling legislation to facilitate wireless ICT access (to avoid laying costly cables based infrastructure). This situation has allowed for cheap and reliable ICT devices, such as third generation mobile phone systems, CDMA 2000, and WiMax devices that enable poor people and those in remote areas to get connected (Mujahid, 2002; Gao & Rafiq, 2009). Third, a large segment of Pakistani society suffers from the lack of basic resources, illiteracy, and low income. Even if ICT access was possible to this segment, it would still be difficult to sustain meaningful impact of ICT in their lives. Finally, Pakistan is experiencing an evolving regulatory framework with changes in government policies for the growth of ICT sector since the early 1990s (Baqir & Pervez, 2000; Mujahid, 2002; Gao & Rafiq, 2009).

This paper particularly focuses on how these technologies have shaped political discourse in Pakistan in the recent years. An analysis of the controversy associated with Pervez Musharraf’s attempts to hold both army chief and president of Pakistan’s office, is the center of this paper. The case of Pakistan provides insights into how ICT can support spontaneous political movements. The second section presents historical perspective of ICT growth in Pakistan. This section develops an historical narrative for in-depth discussion of the critical discourse analysis of the recent political events. The third section explains the research method used for this study. The forth section consists of research findings and discussion is presented in the last section.

**HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE**

Access and growth of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure in Pakistan was deliberately kept limited since its independence in 1947 to almost 40 years later in 1987 to control information flow amidst the threat of Indian sabotage and espionage against Pakistan. The restrictive situation for ICT growth was worsened by the suspicion after two wars with India in 1965 and 1971 that ICT will be used as tools for creating chaos and wage espionage operations against Pakistan. The political instability during the early years after independence allowed for the creation of an environment where ICT were mainly used for propaganda purposes and to hide embarrassing stories implicating politicians and government officials.

The ICT policy development to decen- tralize and liberalize ICT sector started in the 1990s. The political environment of 1990s was eventful with frequent changes in civilian
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