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Agitational Politics in Pakistan: A Case Study of the PTI's *Dharna* 2014*

Abstract:

The paper argues that Pakistan's socio-political history is evident of agitational politics since its inception in 1947 but with the development of social and electronic media in the twenty first century agitational politics has become more effortless and contagious. It also analyzes that PTI's agitational politics has caused political instability and uncertainty but it also developed the political consciousness of the common masses and initiated the trend of direct connection between the politicians and the masses through social media. Through qualitative analyses the paper highlights the fact that PTI introduced a new political fashion of involving youth into politics and giving them an alternative platform than PMLN and PPP.

Key Words:

Agitational Politics, *Dharna*, Electoral rigging, PTI, 'Tsunami'

Introduction:

The history of Pakistan seems to have gone through various socio-political upheavals since the country's inception. This history is fraught with myriad forms of social, cultural and political conflicts and confrontations, which led to the political unrest and instability in the country, the politics of wear and tear, the imposition of martial laws and the problems of un-congenialities between various political institutions, i.e. representative institutions, military, judiciary and bureaucracy.¹ It has become evident that the most influential mean among various other ways to resolve the conflict in Pakistan has been agitation, led by some political leader or some political parties or some coalition of the parties joining civil society and sometimes supported by the establishment. The agitational movements like anti-ahmadiyah movement (1953), Pakistan Democratic Movement (1968), Pakistan National Alliance (1977), Movement for Restoration of Democracy (1981), Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (1988), etc. are the examples that prove that the agitation has always been an effective weapon in the politics of Pakistan but the use of this weapon has become more contagious with the freedom of electronic media in the twenty first century Pakistan. It is an interesting fact that electronic media flourished and enhanced during the military dictatorship of Gen. Pervez Musharraf but by the end of his regime the lawyers' movement for the restoration of judiciary (2007-09) was extremely agitational in its socio-political orientation.²

Besides the established fact that agitational politics has always remained active in Pakistan, interestingly, the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (from hereafter referred to as PTI), (translated as Movement for Justice) is blamed for intensifying this trend in the country, particularly after the PTI's sit-in of 2014. This paper is an effort to analyze the PTI's *dharna* of 2014 as a highlight of agitational politics in the country. This paper also tries to investigate that why PTI's 2014 *dharna* is considered responsible for setting a new trend of agitational politics in the country. Though a plethora of literature is available that has discussed Pakistan's political, social and economic problems and pertinent

*. This research paper has been extracted from the author's Ph. D. Dissertation entitled "Refocusing on Agitational Politics of Pakistan, 1977-2017: Causes and Effects".

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¹ Muhammad Iqbal Chawla & Aman ullah, "The Politics of Pragmatism in Pakistan: A Case Study of the Pakistan People's Party" *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1, 2018, 5. http://www.nihcr.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/39-1%202018/1.%20Politics%20of%20Pragmatism%20in%20Pakistan,%20Iqbal%20Chawla.pdf.

² Azmat Abbas & Saima Jasam, "Ray of Hope: The Case of Lawyers' Movement in Pakistan", *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, Pakistan, 19. https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/weltweit/paper_ray_of_hope_Jasam_and_Abbas.pdf.

movements acquiring mass involvement and demonstrations, yet there is no work that has offered a focused study on politics of agitation in Pakistan. Those books include *inter alia* K. B. Saeed's *The Political System of Pakistan* (1967); G. W. Chaudhary's *Constitutional Development in Pakistan* (1969); Zulfikar Khalid Maluka's *The Myth of Constitutionalism in Pakistan* (1991); Lawrence Ziring's *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century* (1997); Ian Talbot's *Pakistan: A Modern History* (1998); H. Rizvi's *Military, State and Society in Pakistan* (2000); Rai Shakil Akhtar's *Media, Religion and Politics in Pakistan* (2000); Safdar Mahmood's *Pakistan, Political Roots and Development 1947-1999* (2002); Hamid Khan's *Constitutional and Political History of Pakistan* (2005); Tahir Kamran's *Democracy and Governance in Pakistan* (2008); Hussain Haqqani's *Pakistan Between Mosque and Military* (2010) and *Reimagining Pakistan* (2018); Farhan Mujahid Chak *Islam and Pakistan's Political Culture* (2014); Sagheer Ahmad Khan's *Governance in Pakistan: Hybridism, Political Instability and Violence* (2016).

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf:

The PTI was established by Imran Khan in April 1996 as a socio-political movement inspired by the slogan of 'justice, humanity and self-reliance'. In 1997 when PTI contested the elections, it was appreciated as being an emerging third force in the country with two-party system.³ The party could not win even a single seat because of the weak party organization, no base in regional power structure and lack of experience. The party leader Imran Khan tried to increase the party following through frequent media appearances and critique on the government policies instead of improving its political program. The result was that Imran Khan himself could only win one seat on the behalf of PTI in 2002 elections.⁴ The decision to boycott the 2008 elections further diluted the party's place in the political scenario of the country.⁵

The first time when the party gained some political significance was in 2011 when PTI raised voice against the unbridled corruption culture in the country and decline of Pak-US relations after giving so many sacrifices for being part of the US's war on terror. The response that the PTI was given by the Pakistani youth in its rally at Lahore in 2011 reflected the desperation of the youth from already existing political parties and the scope of PTI as an emerging political power in the country.⁶ Imran Khan with the popular support of the youth became the most favourable leader of the country by 68% of the population.⁷ PTI has always tried to differentiate itself from the other political parties of the country with the slogan of change but the electoral structure and the politics of patronage have stopped it from following its vision.⁸ Therefore it has so much appeal for the status quo that its supporters get dismayed.

The Slogan of 'Change':

Usually, the sudden and abrupt rise of PTI on the horizon of Pakistani politics is attributed to the factors like 'good timing',⁹ 'catchy slogans that were directly hitting at the discontent of the masses',¹⁰ and after decades of Z. A. Bhutto's death the nation found another 'charismatic leader'.¹¹ Imran Khan emerged as a charismatic leader who knew how to keep his hand on the nation's pulse at the time when sense of political crisis was prevalent. The fluctuated and weak relations between the US and Pakistan and disappointment of the nation with major political parties to deliver any effective performance for national development gave PTI the chance to appear as a third power.¹² PTI scored points on the prevailing public opinion about the open and brutal abuse of the public offices in the hands of the political elite for their self-aggrandizement at the cost of common man's life, health, future and

³ A. Ahmed Khan, Third Force or Third Farce? *The Herald*. May 25, 1996.

⁴ <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/Documents/General%20Election%202002/Party%20Position%20NA.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Stephanie Flamenbaum, "The PTI and Pakistan's Changing Political Landscape", *Peace Brief 127*, United States Institute of Peace, May 24, 2012, 3. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PB-127.pdf>.

⁷ Pew Research Centre, US Image in Pakistan Falls No Further Following bin Laden Killing. *Global Attitudes Project*. Washington, D.C, 2011.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ A. Rafiq, "The Imran Khan Phenomenon" *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2012.

¹⁰ H. Yusuf, "Explaining the rise of Imran Khan" *Foreign Policy*, October 31, 2011.

¹¹ M. R. Tahir, "I'll Be Your Mirror" *The Caravan-a Journal of Politics and Culture*, January 1, 2012.

¹² *Ibid.*

security. The consistently declining economy of the country and increasing lawlessness was further mixed with the public fury over wrong policies of participating at the front-line in the war on terror as a US ally which has given nothing in return but risks to the security of the country and its masses at the hands of terrorism. The US-led covert operation to arrest Osama bin Laden, the violation of Pakistan's sovereign territory by frequent drone attacks and the apparent US interference in Pakistan's domestic affairs gave PTI enough ground to criticize Pakistan's foreign policy with special reference to Pak-US relations.¹³

By highlighting all these problems PTI gave the idea of '*Naya Pakistan*' means new Pakistan which will be modelled after the Islamic State of Madina of Holy Prophet (PBUH) as corruption-free society based on equality. This is also a worth-mentioning fact that only the slogan of change against corruption and anti-America ideology would never have captured the attention of the masses but it was the personality of Imran Khan which was already acknowledged by the Pakistani masses as a cricketer who won the 1992 cricket World Cup.¹⁴ Electronic and social media has also played the leading role in propagating the PTI's vision. The transparent records of Imran Khan's welfare hospital Sahukat Khanum Cancer Hospital have also given him an edge over the tried and tested political leadership of the country.¹⁵

Elections 2013:

Although the party developed a strongly appealing program and agenda for the masses but the major test of the agenda was to transform its social and electronic media followers into the voters during the general elections of 2013. PTI was the pioneer of introducing social media platforms for political mobilization because they harnessed the horizontal integration of social media very effectively to cover the socio-economic or ethnic heterogeneity of its supports base.¹⁶ According to a report by Express Tribune during its election campaign PTI had 30 workers as volunteers for party's official website maintenance.¹⁷ It was this active social media campaign of the PTI that they got 100,000 hits daily and a face-book account with 500,000 members.¹⁸ This successful use of social media platform by PTI compelled its competitors PPP and PMLN to improve their social media skills but still PMLN's face-book account got 1200 hits per day.¹⁹ It was also for the first time in the electoral history of the country that the PTI candidates were directly communicating with their voters through twitter. With this direct communication the role of print and electronic media journalists was minimized for setting the party agenda critically as the candidates were controlling their own campaigns through over 3 million Pakistani twitter followers.²⁰ This active use of social media not only allowed the candidates to promote their campaign but also helped the like-minded individuals who were the permanent followers of the philosophy of PTI to socialize through this channel.

Success or Failure in Election 2013:

The general elections of 2013 were the first public test of PTI after such strong use of social media and the anti-corruption slogans but the sweeping victory as claimed by PTI was not achieved. It could secure 28 general and 7

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ C. Almeida, "Change We Khan", *Dawn*, 3 November 2011.

¹⁵ For an analysis of PTI's anti-incumbency advantage see M. Afzal, "Can Imran Khan Ride to Victory?" *Brookings Institute*, 2013.

¹⁶ A. Rashid, "Politics after Patronage", *Tanqeed: a magazine of politics and culture*. 4, 2013. Available from <http://www.tanqeed.org/2013/05/politics-after-patronage/> [Accessed on June 14, 2015].

¹⁷ Marcus Michaelsen, "New Media vs. Old Politics: The Internet, Social Media and Democratization in Pakistan", *Fesmedia Asia Series*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, 43. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08748.pdf>.

¹⁸ M. Rizwan, "Cyberspace-the new battleground for political parties", *The Tribune Express*, April 15 2012.

¹⁹ Marcus Michaelsen, "New Media vs. Old Politics", 2011, 45.

²⁰ S. Ahmad & M. M. Akoric, "My name is Khan: the use of Twitter in the campaign for 2013 Pakistan General Election", 47th *Hawaii International Conference on System Science*. IEEE Conference Publications. Also see S. Ilyas & Q. Khushi, Persuasive Strategies in Political Discourse: A Study of a Political Party's Official Face Book Pages. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS)*. 33 (2) 2013.

reserved seats in the National Assembly²¹ while 65% seats in Provincial Assembly of KPK. Although the result was not the 'Tsunami' dreamed by PTI but still it became the second-largest party in the National Assembly after PMLN even leaving behind the PPP. The margin of success in 76 seats of National Assembly from where PTI was the runner-up was as low as 27% on average.²² In some constituencies the margin to success of PTI was so close like 1.4% that the party accused PMLN of electoral rigging.²³ The heavy mandate of PMLN allowing it to form a single-party government further strengthened the PTI's apprehensions.

The Politics of Agitation:

Unfortunately in Pakistan, the opposition parties have never played an effective role to stabilize the democracy and to play a healthy role to criticize the policies of the ruling party instead their focus had always remained on proving the government failure. The opposition parties usually never accept the electoral results and the ruling party is being accused of rigging the elections. Our history is evidence of such minor or major allegations or even campaign like PNA to be launched against the electoral rigging. In Pakistan opposition considers its' sole responsibility to topple down the government by hook or by crook. This trend was especially followed during 1990 when the opposition party whether PPP or PMLN always supported the President for using 58(2B) against the government to dismiss it. This role of opposition has not only shaken the confidence of the common people over the electoral process and the politicians but also interrupted the democratic cycle in the country letting un-democratic forces to take the advantage of the situation.²⁴

The same trend has been followed by the PTI from 2013 to 2018, when they were supposed to play the role of a healthy opposition and criticize the government for its policies and give counter-policies, they were resorting the fiery rhetoric. Instead of being in the parliament to have a check on the policies and administration on the single-party government PTI was involved in street agitations, rallies, long marches, sit-ins or strikes.²⁵ PTI launched a massive movement against the electoral rigging in the general elections of May 2013. They accused the PMLN government of stealing their party's mandate.²⁶ So the protest was launched in four different phases in four different cities of the country.

Protest Rallies:

1. The first protest rally was launched by PTI in Islamabad on 11 May 2014 in which they demanded to reopen the 4 constituencies. Till then they threatened to protest in front of the Pakistan Election Commission office every Friday.²⁷
2. The second protest procession was arranged in Faisalabad on 24 May 2014 in which Imran Khan used more furious tone for the government and questioned the electoral victory of the government and announced next *jalsa* in Sialkot.²⁸
3. The third PTI *jalsa* was held at Sialkot on 7 June 2014 in which Imran Khan accused the judiciary of being part of electoral rigging.²⁹

²¹ This result is based on the gazette issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan on June 5, 2013. Subsequently PTI vacated a number of seats under Article 223 of the constitution and after the results of by-elections PTI now has 26 general seats and 7 reserved seats in the National Assembly.

²² "The 2013 National and Provincial Assembly Elections in Pakistan", Final Report of the Joint International Observation Mission of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI, Washington, USA) and Asian Network for Free Elections (ANEREL, Bangkok, Thailand), 70. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI-ANFREL-Pakistan-EOM-Final-Report.pdf>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Rabbia Javed & Dawood Memon, "Political Instability and Lessons for Pakistan: Case Study of 2014 PTI Sit-in Protests", MPRA Paper No. 76086, 11 January 2017, <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/76086>. Retrieved on 8/8/2019.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rabbia Javed & Dawood Memon, "Political Instability and Lessons for Pakistan", (2017).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

4. The next *jalsa* was held in Bahawalpur on 27 June 2014 where Imran Khan finally announced *Azadi March* to be launched against electoral rigging of 2013.³⁰ He gave one month to the government to accept their demands because of the holy month of *Ramadan* and declared the *Azadi March* to be starting from 14 August 2014.³¹

Informal PTI–PAT Union:

The incident of brutal firing by the Lahore police on the innocent protestors of Pakistan Awami Tehreek (from hereafter referred to as PAT) at model town on 17 June 2014 added more fuel to the fire.³² This incident highlighted the mismanagement of the PMLN government and gave a solid reason to both parties, PTI and PAT to launch a collective movement against the government. PTI and PAT announced collective *Azadi March* from Lahore to Islamabad on 14 August 2014 and promised to continue the protest till the fair and impartial investigation of the electoral rigging.³³ Both the parties were not fully merged into each other but on 10 August Allama Tahir-ul Qadri the PAT leader announced to proceed his party's *Inqilab march* parallel to PTI's *Azadi march*.³⁴ Both the marches proceeded together although on different routes but with same cause.

Demands of the Protest:

Although PTI initiated its protest with the demand for an investigation of the electoral rigging but with passage of time the PTI demands adopted more generalized structure. The main demands of protest were:³⁵

- Transparent and impartial investigation of the electoral rigging of 2013.
- Judicial inquiry of the people involved in the electoral rigging.
- Reforms in the electoral system and election commission.
- Resignation of PM Nawaz Sharif and the Punjab CM Shehbaz Sharif.
- Dismissal of PMLN government and the formation of a caretaker government.
- Fresh and free elections to be held under the caretaker government.

Azadi March:

The *Azadi march* was started on 14 August 2014 at 12:30 after Imarn Khan's speech at Zaman Park Lahore and preceded towards Islamabad.³⁶ Moving very slowly and rallying through all the important points in Lahore the rally reached Islamabad on 16 August 2014 at Zero Point during the rain.³⁷ On 17 August Imran Khan delivered a fierce speech of his career and announced to launch 'civil disobedience' movement after the deadline of two days to fulfil his demands by asking his followers not to pay the electricity or other utility bills and taxes.³⁸ Another announcement was made by Shah Mehmood Qureshi the vice President of the party through a media conference

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid*

³² "Pakistan Country Report", *Asylum Research Consultancy*, February 20, 2015, 51. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1253687/90_1435729343_arc-2015-06-pakistan.pdf.

³³ Mariam Mufti, "Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf: A New Phenomenon or A Continuation of the Political Status Quo", *NORIA*, South Asian Program, October 2015, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Pakistan Country Report", *Asylum Research Consultancy*, 2015, 53.

³⁶ Rabbia Javed & Dawood Memon, "Political Instability and Lessons for Pakistan", (2017).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Mariam Mufti, "Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf", (2015), 5.

after the *jalsa* that the PTI core committee has decided about all the PTI MNAs to resign from their respective seats. He further added that the PTI MPAs have also been decided to resign from Punjab and Sindh.

To further increase their pressure on the PMLN government the PTI announced to march towards the 'Red zone' on 19 August 2014.³⁹ Red Zone in Islamabad is considered a high-security area because of the Parliament House, Prime Minister and President Houses, diplomatic enclaves and the embassies and the other government offices. The PTI and PAT workers entered the Red Zone with cranes to remove the barriers and shipping containers. The emergency was declared in Islamabad Poly Clinic Hospital and PIMS but the government announced not to use force to disperse the agitators.⁴⁰ Besides the announcement thousands of police forces were appointed in the area. PTI and PAT announced that the protests will continue until the dismissal of the government. This prolonged agitation turned into violence and when the protestors tried to enter the PM house forcefully the police used tear gas to disperse them resulting in above 500 injured men, women and policemen.⁴¹ When the agitators' mob became more furious and tried to enter the Parliament house the Pakistan army intervened and ordered the people to remain out of the building. But the public-police clashes continued and some vehicles were damaged and burnt. Some of the protestors entered the PTV office and damaged it although later-on PTI denied their involvement in the incident.⁴²

When the fifth round of talks between the agitators and the government failed the Supreme Court of Pakistan offered their services to play the role of a mediator.⁴³ The PM Nawaz Sharif also involved the army chief Gen. Raheel Sharif in the issue.⁴⁴ Till then the dozens of PTI and PAT workers were arrested by the police under the charges of agitation and violence. Around 4100 agitators were sentenced by the court on 14 days judicial remand among which 3187 were PTI workers.⁴⁵ In violent clashes between the police and the public 13 protestors were killed while many policemen were injured.⁴⁶ These police brutalities lead to the resignations of one senior policewoman and three senior policemen. Islamabad police was also defying against the government orders of using the force on the protestors. After one month of the *dharna* in Islamabad, Imran Khan announced to launch the protest in other cities of the country like Karachi, Multan and Lahore.⁴⁷ The protest continued till more than four months and was announced to end on 17 December 2014 after the APS attack incident due to the security concerns.⁴⁸

Conclusion:

However, a three-member judicial commission was formed under the headship of Chief Justice Nasir-ul-Mulk to investigate the electoral rigging in the 2013 elections. The judicial commission completed its investigation and announced its report on 3 July 2015 giving clean chit to the PMLN government.⁴⁹ The commission found no evidence against PMLN's electoral rigging. Although the whole agitational episode of PTI's *dharna* was ended up at nothing proved but it gave two benefits to the PTI for its future. Firstly with such an active political role it became one of the most popular political parties of the country even edging PPP behind it. Secondly with its four months' long sit-in, it's set a new precedent in the country's political history which gave it a new introduction in Punjab's political scenario. The voter of Punjab that has been working for PMLN since 1990s now found another option.⁵⁰ Both of these benefits to PTI reflected in 2018's election with the victory of PTI in the National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly of Punjab.

³⁹ "Pakistan Country Report", *Asylum Research Consultancy*, 2015, 55.

⁴⁰ Rabbia Javed & Dawood Memon, "Political Instability and Lessons for Pakistan", (2017).

⁴¹ Mariam Mufti, "Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf", (2015), 5.

⁴² *Ibid*, 6.

⁴³ "Pakistan Country Report", *Asylum Research Consultancy*, 2015, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ Ayesha Mulla, "Broadcasting the *Dharna*: Mediating 'Contained' Populism in Contemporary Pakistan", *International Journal of Communication*, 11 (2017), 4185. <https://gsssrjournal.com/papers/AZACCFTJLA.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429632373_316.pdf.

⁵⁰ H. Iqtidar & K. Munir, "Inquilab in Pakistan: the Containers and those Contained", *Economic and Political Weekly*. 49(39) 2014.

The PTI is duly criticized for introducing more agitational trends into Pakistani politics. The constant agitation the PTI caused during the PMLN's regime is a precedent that is being followed by PMLN as an opposition party since 2018.⁵¹ But this fact can also not be denied that PTI introduced a new strategy of dissent into Pakistan's political culture. The four months-long sit-in was a new strategy of its type into Pakistani politics.⁵² The methods used for the purpose were certainly agitational but it involved the Pakistani masses into the electoral and political setup of the country more deeply and actively. The Pakistani masses realized the significance of their vote and tried a new setup with voting for a new party. For PTI it's not easy to continue with its slogan of change as they opted for 'electable' candidates during the elections and has chosen the ministers and other administrative workers from the previous political teams. The PTI leadership has to understand this fact that the political setup can't be changed overnight; it needs to go through a certain process to get changed. There is a lot of difference in PTI's position as an opposition party and as a ruling party and they have to adopt a more practical strategy.

⁵¹ Madiha Afzal, "An Inflection Point for Pakistan's Democracy", *Foreign Policy*, Brookings, 2019, 10, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_pakistan_afzal.pdf.

⁵² H. Iqtidar & K. Munir, "Inquilab in Pakistan: the Containers and those Contained", 2014.