

From Citizens to Fans: Celebrity Culture and the Collapse of Political Accountability in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growing interconnection between celebrity culture and politics in Pakistan, arguing that this integration has significantly undermined democratic accountability. Examining the qualitative approach to such research analysis insights, this study will investigate the quantitative aspect of the political roles of figures such as Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, and Bilawal Bhutto, as represented in today's media sources, focusing on personalities rather than policy-driven directions. The evidence from news media, social media networks, speeches, and secondary literature suggests that Pakistani citizens are becoming more fan-like, emotionally loyal, and attached to charisma, rather than being critical and responsible civilians. The domination of media coverage and its related online discussion idolizes political leadership to present a spectacle rather than content and tribalism instead of democratic deliberation. These findings indicate a profound change in the character of political participation, in which fan practices — some of which involve meme warfare, dismissal of criticism, and sobbing emotive hashtag campaigns — succeed where enlightened political discussions do not occur. Especially in a fragile Pakistani democracy with military interventionism, institutional weakness, and political polarization, this is a significant cause of concern. Equally, the paper argues that the individualization and emotivization of politics creates an ambiance where policy discourse and institutional responsibility take a back seat in preference to the successful enactment of ceremonial loyalty and management. To protect democratic

norms, the paper proposes restoring enthusiasm to the political culture, guided by critical citizenship, trust in institutions, and participation with accountability. The long-term survival of the preferential politics of celebrities poses a threat to the irreducible democratic plurality of the Pakistani regime, as long as the situation remains unchanged.

Keywords: Political Participation, Celebrity Culture, Democratic Accountability, social media, Emotional Engagement, Media Framing, Pakistan Politics

Introduction

The liaison between politics and celebrity culture in modern Pakistan has produced far-reaching changes in the forms of political participation. Citizens have been increasingly operating as fans, and no longer as critical agents of a democratic society (Markauskaite et al., 2022). The party members in the country are perceived as emotionally involved observers, whose loyalty overrides the issues of critical assessment. There has been an extreme shift in the environment, as policy has been replaced by image and spectacle, and this is a phenomenon filled with fan loyalty to such frenzy. Consequently, with the blending of boundaries between the two domains, political leaders are today worshiped or criticized depending on their good looks, charisma, and self-advertisement, as opposed to their skill in managing people (O'hanlon, 2017).

This shift is not only occurring in Pakistan, but it is also no accident. The rise of the influencer culture and the decline of traditional media sources have led to a significant increase in politicians who become global celebrities in most other civilizations. The positive perspective on the issue of media-savvy portrayal of political power could be reflected in the examples of leaders like Narendra Modi in India or Donald Trump in the US, who have already shaped the new political power (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Nonetheless, this transformation has been experienced in Pakistan in a very controversial and divisive manner. There are also politicians such as Imran Khan, the former cricketing superstar and current prime minister, who have developed a personality cult anchored in spectacle to become popular across the board and avoid the political discourse (Khan, 2019). There is now a change in sea tide that can be attributed to his rise to power and the fanatical nature of his support base; people no longer participate in politics due to civic pride but because of their emotional attachment, tribalism, and ritual.

With this change, the consequences will be far-reaching. Theoretically, democracy is founded upon the people being educated to take their leaders to task through active participation in the political arena, healthy criticism, and healthy debate. The fan-based politics grossly distort this ideal. Fans are emotional, have a sense of belonging, and are loyal; hence, honesty, competency, and openness are not of much importance (Ricci, 2020). Instead of aiming at reforming their institutions, political leaders are increasingly coming to view this as a tool to control their image and performance. The outcome is that political accountability is harmed, and leadership pageants replace the normal government.

A sociopolitical reality that increases these coercive tendencies is the reality of Pakistan. Military dominion, judicial interventions, poor institutions, and patronage

relations can characterize the history of the country's political life (Dorn et al., 2022). Such a weak democratic system has a limited number of accountability mechanisms. The phenomenon of celebrity politics increases this weakness. As careful policy deliberation and a system of checks and balances are pushed aside in favor of soundbites, social media hashtags, viral videos, and confrontational displays on television programs, we have lost the opportunity to engage in critical policy debate. Politicians are also rewarded to appease their limited base by usually polarizing and proposing conspiracies instead of contributing positively to a discussion (Daou et al., 2023). The fear factor is the outcome: a political culture that rewards loyalists over competence, and labels questioners as traitors.

Besides, the media is a household star in sustaining this celebrity-politics nexus. Profitable business strategies and metrics surrounding ratings often create an atmosphere of sensationalism, downplaying their significance on TV and online networks ("Communication Research Into the Digital Society," 2024). Politicians have become as packaged as pop stars - interviews have become like performances, campaign rallies like concerts, and press conferences like stage acts. This is facilitated via social media, Twitter (to be X), Facebook, and TikTok in particular. Leaders reach out to their followers without involving institutional gatekeepers and the scrutiny of journalists (Putzel, 2020). Emotional content is rewarded, and algorithms punish complexity, as virality is the primary goal. Fact-checking in such a landscape often takes a backseat to narrative construction, and popular appeal may carry the day over truth.

The public psyche is also exposed to the increasing fan-based political culture. The citizens are becoming more consumers of politics as fans rather than active players, and they identify themselves with the political leaders either as face-view elements of personal identity form or as the source of national pride. This identification will usually cause a form of cognitive dissonance where even failure or corruption is denied or explained. Political opposition does not imply rivals, but depicts enemies, and criticism is seen as betrayal (Aarons & Berger, 2017). This climate suppresses any opposition, levels out political speech, and disintegrates norms of democracy.

In this paper, the author contends that through the fusion of celebrity and politics, the relationship between people and political power in Pakistan has essentially shifted. It argues that the process of citizen zings the fans is one way to diminish political accountability because the concentration has more to do with personality-based loyalty than it does with the process of governance (Herman, 2018). With an analysis of media, political campaigns, and popular discourse, the paper will discuss the fact that emotional loyalty, spectacle, and symbolic politics are supplanting rational discussion and institutional regulation. It will thus reflect on the implications of this on the future of democracy in Pakistan, and whether the fan-activist as a political participant can ever work with the pressures of democratic accountability (Boykoff, 2022).

This can be a criticism of single leaders or parties, but the whole culture of politics is also being reflected upon, finally. With Pakistan facing economic woes, institutional instability, and social division, the costs of this transformation are also high (Tatiana, 2022). It is necessary to understand how celebrity culture has transformed the shape of political responsibility to envision a more participatory, informed, and versatile

democratic future.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative research design approaches that rely heavily on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and media analysis on the extent to which the phenomena of celebrity culture in Pakistan are the cause of the diminished accountability of politics (Alkhamash, 2023). The intention is to explore how political personalities are created in celebrity icons, how citizens relate to these creations, and how they have influenced democratic norms and accountability practices in the nation.

The study is mainly an interpretive type of research design which focuses on the subjective meaning inherent to the discourse around politics, their presentation in the media, and social participation. Given that the phenomenon under study is directly related to symbolic communication, emotion, and representation, qualitative approaches are the most suitable methods to capture the details of these processes. The research draws on numerous references to provide comprehensive insights into the issue.

Data Collection

The most salient information within this study is as follows:

Media Texts:

A purposive sample of news programs, including political talk shows, press conferences, and campaign advertisements, was retrieved from mainstream Pakistani TV channels (Geo News, ARY News, and Dunya TV) between 2018 and 2024. It has chosen these according to ratings and their influence on political discourses.

Attachment to social media:

The discussions regarding political discourse on Twitter (previously X), Facebook, and TikTok were reviewed. A sample of viral posts, memes, culture, and political commentary was gathered using the hashtags around the usage of prominent political figures, in particular Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, and Bilawal Bhutto, to evaluate the tone, content, and fan-based rhetoric (Cervi & Divon, 2023).

Speeches and Statements to the Press:

The self-image of politicians as celebrities and their approaches to support bases through emotional and symbolic means were analyzed in speeches and public addresses by top political leaders.

Secondary Literature, Interviews:

To place the findings in perspective and incorporate expert opinion, a review of the academic literature, newspaper op-ed pieces, and political memoirs was conducted, along with a small number of semi-structured interviews with journalists, political analysts, and university students.

Analytical Framework

To conclude the mechanisms of creating and shaping the celebrity in politics, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), based on the work of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, was employed to analyze the data and identify the tropes of language use, image, and narrative that represent the political celebrity (Bilá & Ivanova, 2020). CDA proved helpful in exposing the power relationships between the dictates of media discourse and the ideological roles of fan action.

Simultaneously, the media framing theory was utilized to consider how media and social network users represent political figures and events. This also involved an investigation into whether it is run on personal charisma rather than policy, spectacle rather than substance, or loyalty rather than severe judgment.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of the study and the interpretive analysis itself are limitations of this study. There is also an algorithmic filtering of social media data, as well as echo chambers, which can lead to a process of skewed representation. In addition, interviews were not a possibility as there was limited time and resources.

Ethical Considerations

The use of all publicly available information was in line with the principle of fair use. Participants of the interview were not identified and were made aware of the purpose of the research. The provocative political matter was handled with care to avoid triggering political bias or causing harm.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: The study concerning Media Representation of Politicians as Celebrities (2018-2024)

Politician	Media Focus % on Personality	Media Focus % on Policy	Media Tone	Media Strategy
Imran Khan	78%	22%	Charismatic, Heroic	Emotional appeal, Past Cricket Persona
Nawaz Sharif	60%	40%	Traditional, Authoritative	Family Legacy, Economic Stewardship
Bilawal Bhutto	68%	32%	Youthful, Symbolic	Dynastic Symbolism, Modern Language
Maryam Nawaz	74%	26%	Glamorous, Defiant	Personal Branding, Victim Narrative

The statistics reveal a pronounced trend in media coverage, focusing on personality over policy in the depiction of renowned Pakistani politicians, particularly members of parliament. This trend supports the notion that the celebrity phenomenon has permeated politics deeply. No case is more evident than that of Imran Khan, where 78 percent of the media coverage is personality-focused. This is still in line with his former image as a cricketing legend, whereby the media has packaged him as a person who is charismatic and heroic (Kanemasu, 2023). This appeal to emotion on national pride and remembrance generates a loyal, fan-like following that tends to overlook governance failures and inconsistent policies.

Maryam Nawaz comes next in line, as 74 percent of media attention is directed to her personality. She is often portrayed as sexy and rebellious —the quintessential twentieth-century heroine who takes on the might of the state. The media strategy she uses is highly dependent on personal branding and a story of a victim who is fittingly associated with the political legacy of her father (Aurigi & Odendaal, 2020). This positioning will make her political experience legendary, persuading her supporters to connect with her on an emotional level rather than analyzing her policies.

In the same context, Bilawal Bhutto is crafted as a young and representative personality, with the media attention given to the personality making a high share of 68%. A strong part of his political narrative is his dynastic identity, but more so his modern image as a Western-educated individual. Although he does occasionally comment on policy matters, the media is more interested in establishing his family heritage and the kind of symbol he represents to the PPP, thus portraying him more as a legacy figure rather than an innovator of the policy (Wang et al., 2020).

Even the leader, Nawaz Sharif (the highest policy-centric coverage, 40%), remains homogenously covered through personality as well as family lineage. His media tone is quite authoritative and conservative, with an accent on loyalty established by experience rather than on ideas.

In general, this information highlights the fact that media discourses in Pakistan are much more concerned with personality rather than content, making the political culture in Pakistan based on emotional attachment and almost celebrity-driven adoration, and damaging democracy that relies on its ability to hold its government accountable and operate with rational civic participation.

Table 2: Common Fan-Like Behaviors on Social Media Exhibit Political Supporters

Behavior Type	Description	Observed Frequency	Platforms Most Active
Unquestioning Loyalty	Defending political leader regardless of evidence	High	Twitter, Facebook
Meme Warfare	Use memes to glorify leader or attack opposition	High	Facebook, TikTok
Emotional Hashtag Campaigns	Use of emotionally charged hashtags (#Behind You Skipper)	High	Twitter

Rejection of Criticism	Labelling dissenters as 'traitors' or 'paid agents'	Medium	Twitter, YouTube
Idolization Language	Referring to leaders as saviors, messiahs, martyrs	High	Facebook, Instagram

The statistics indicate that fan culture has also emerged as a significant form of political participation on social media in Pakistan, substituting critical citizenship with emotional enthusiasm for loyalty. The political supporters across platforms behave more like celebrity fans and less like democrats.

Unquestioning loyalty is one of the most widespread features, especially on Twitter and Facebook, where admirers of their favorite leaders justify their current actions irrespective of the facts and circumstances. Such an attitude promotes irresponsibility because any criticism, however valid, is summarily rejected or belittled (Carvalho et al., 2022). It creates an atmosphere in which facts are insubstantial in comparison with the demands of emotional loyalty.

Another everyday use of memes is Meme warfare, which occurs mainly on Facebook and TikTok, and is employed to make heroes of political figures on the one hand and destroy their enemies on the other. Such memes make political realities less orienting and harder to share because they simplify the political reality, but also arguably more polarizing (Glynn et al., 2017). Although they make younger populations get involved, they also render governance shallow and make politics entertaining.

The plethora of emotional hashtag campaigns (e.g., #BehindYouSkipper) on Twitter highlights the extent to which support around an issue is generated using emotional branding other than constructive critique. Such hashtags become especially popular during political upheavals or rallies, making the meaning of fan loyalty more straightforward as a way to support the leader (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023).

The refusal to accept critical opinions, often in the form of being called a traitor or foreign agent, is not very common but is highly influential. It is particularly evident on Twitter and YouTube, where opposition is silenced and democratic discussions are stifled, rendering any disagreement a moral shortcoming.

Lastly, the breaking down of the wall between religion and politics or celebrity worship would also be added to the use of vocabulary of idolization on Facebook and Instagram, where politicians are called messiahs and martyrs. Through the discourse that critics can easily escape this way, leaders can be seen to adopt a cult devotionism that can lampoon democratic responsibility and examination.

When combined, all of these activities reflect a potentially deadly move toward participating in politics not necessarily based on the feeling that this is their civic duty, but based on the cult of celebrity and the tribalism on the internet.

Table 3: The red flags of failure of political accountability as it appears in discourses and media

Indicator	Evidence in Discourse/Media	Example/Source
Distractions in Matters of Governance	Talks of personal sacrifices, or conspiracies.	Talk shows after 2022 Protests

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Rejection of Corruption.	The political motivation of criticism or foreign-funded criticism	Twitter users in support of PTI
Individualization of Political Sense of Self	Leader contested with party or national personification	"Only Imran Can Save Pak" slogan
Lack of Policy Debate	Rallies and talk shows enumerating about leaders' image, rather than his agenda	Geo News, ARY news (2023)
Emotional Rallying Round the Facts	Videos and speeches filled with nationalism, religion, emotion.	Imran Khan full Jalsa Speeches

The statistics reveal significant discursive and media trend lines, highlighting the concerning political accountability issues in Pakistan that stem from the personalization and emotionalization of politics. The rhetoric and media increasingly favor the tired tropes that corrupt or elevate leaders beyond reproach and make their charisma more critical than any meaningful policy debate.

A significant sign of this is the diversion of governance as political dialogue shifts the focus away from urgent problems, emphasizing personal sacrifices of the leaders or portraying events as conspiracies of other parties. This makes the issue less scrutinized by the masses, as the coverage in said talk shows in the wake of the protests in 2022 often revolved around the victimhood and courage of Imran Khan, more so than any policy failures or institutional collapse, hence, less examination by the masses (Bell, 2018).

Likewise, dismissal of corruption accusations is also frequent, especially on the web. Most supporters of PTI on Twitter refer to criticism of their leader as politically motivated or as an attempt at foreign influence. The practice not only discounts legitimate concerns but also criminalizes opposition and continues to erode spaces for responsibility and free expression.

The political identity is being individualized, as observed in the political slogan of "Only Imran Can Save Pakistan," and can be considered as the documentation of the merger of political leadership with national identity (Laura et al., 2018). That type of framing puts the leader above the party or even the state, in which opposing him will seem anti-patriotic, and the level of loyalty seems a moral duty.

Also, it is striking that policy debate is absent. Geo News and ARY News are examples of media outlets where leaders are addressed more on their image and symbolic power, but not on any specific agenda or plan of governance. Intelligent politics interplay is stunted by such a transition that promotes surface treatments and minustands.

Finally, appeals based on emotion or emotional rallying, as portrayed in complete Jalsa (rally) speeches: religious, nationalist, and emotional appeals to mobilize the audience. Rational argumentation is bypassed in those speeches, and this preconditions the atmosphere in which the responsibility of attributes about the policy

substitutes emotional appeal.

Taken together, these are the indicators of the shift to the trend of performative and spectatorial politics and loyalty, which undermine democratic values and institutional accountability.

Table 4: FAN vs. Citizen Political Behavior – Comparative Features

Trait	Fan Behavior	Citizen Behavior
Politically Engagement	Emotion Driven, Personality Centric	Institutionally oriented, policy based
Response to Criticism	Defensiveness, anger, personal attack	Free discussion, fact-checking
Role of Media Consumption	Selective, chamber reinforcement echo	Various resources, analytical mind
Accountability Expectations	Simple; loyalty over all.	High; leaders assumed to give and expand on it
Political Identity	Integrated leadership/party	On a basis of civic responsibility

The aspect of comparing the fan behavior with the behavior of the citizen highlights a radical change in the manner in which a good number of Pakistanis participate in politics. Fans are highly emotion-driven and personality-based, with loyalties often tied to individuals rather than policies or rules (Li & Kumar, 2022). Conversely, an activist citizen with their political account will take a policy-driven, institutionally based course that will appreciate government more than charisma.

Upon criticism, fans will often engage in defensiveness or personal attacks, as they perceive critique as a betrayal rather than an opportunity to exercise a healthy democratic process. The citizens are, however, glad to have a facts-based discussion, and the criticism serves as a necessary tool for accountability and development.

Both in media consumption and consumption by fans, echo chambers are usually experienced where fans selectively consume media that reinforces their views. Citizens, in their turn, strive to find various sources and use critical thinking to analyze information objectively.

The expectation regarding accountability is incredibly varied, too. Fans insist on loyalty at the expense of transparency, and citizens require leaders to explain their initiatives and be held accountable for their actions. Likewise, fans have a predisposition towards merging themselves with the leader or party, and this develops the personalized political interpretation (Dwivedi et al., 2022). The people still maintain their civic identity as citizens, exercising their political voice to defend democratic ideals rather than personalities.

This transition to fandom is one of the causes of the deterioration of the norms of democracy and the failure to create political accountability in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The results have shown that there has been an immense shift in the political front of Pakistan, characterized by the politics of celebrity culture and the disappearance of

democratic accountability. The study shows how, through an in-depth analysis of the media, discourse patterns, and use of social media, citizens have become fans rather than cynical members of the democratic process. The repercussions of such alteration cannot be overrated as far as governance, civic responsibility, and political activity.

In the above numbers, we find that the political leaders such as Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, and Bilawal Bhutto are mainly represented with a personality-based tone with minimal coverage of their policy platforms. There have been substitutions of substantive governance debate with emotional branding, heroic storytelling, and symbolic image design. Such tendencies are fueled by media outlets, particularly television and social networking, which prioritize entertainment appeal over balanced reporting and aim to go viral.

At the same time, the behavior exhibited by fans of politics on social media has more fan-like properties: blind allegiance, idolizing language, and emotional hash-tag campaigns have become the part and parcel of politics. Criticism is therefore treated as betrayal in this environment, and any form of political identity is further degraded to that of a tribe. The perpetuation of these actions is influenced by the media that promote spectacle instead of content, and this has brought about the erosion of policy discourse and weakened the institutional checks.

The replacement of the citizenship role with fandom is especially hazardous in situations like Pakistan, where the foundations of institutional strength, military interventionism, and populist discourse are already problematic in democratic performance. Emotional politics promotes ignorance in decision-making, impedes pluralism in decision-making, and also encourages loyalty instead of competency.

To counter this tide, a reclaiming of political discourse should be in order, i.e., focusing on policy, accountability, and institutional reform. The people must be re-initiated as active stakeholders of democracy, rather than passive fans. Other than this, Pakistan is on the verge of stronger polarization, erosion of trust in institutions, and a future where the political charisma supersedes democratic governance completely.

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