Misuse of Religion and Political Mobilization: A Comparative Analysis of Dharna Culture in Pakistan

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Abstract:

The paper is a critical investigation of the abuse of religion in political mobilization using a comparative discussion of the Dharna (sit-in) culture in Pakistan. Through the method of qualitative case study, it theorizes the relationship between religious sentiments, discourses and images used by political leaders as a means of legitimacy, rallying or exerting pressure on the government. The case study pays attention to the 2014 PTI-PAT and 2017 TLP sit-ins, discussing the ways religious discourse could be used as a factor of street politics and the consequence of this strategy to the functioning of democracy, political stability, and polarization in Pakistani society. It has been found that instrumentalization of religion using Dharnas the foundation of democratic institutions and enhances violent political culture in developing countries which are yet to be fully democratic in South Asia.

Keywords: Dharna Culture, Political Mobilization, Abuse of Religion, Pakistan Politics, Religious Speech, Street Politics, Democracy Institutions, Political Polarization, Populism, South Asia

Introduction

Religion and politics have also been prominent factors in moulding the sociopolitical facets of Pakistan where religious discourses have been adopted, namely unwarranted, as a way to promote a political agenda and muster the society towards its support (Nasr, 2001). The culture of the Dharna (sit in) has been a major way of political expression in the last few years where the street politics and religious symbols have been combined to exert pressure on the state (Shah, 2014). Although, protests are a democratic right, misuse of religion in Dharna politics is causing some doubts on democratic consolidation, democratic stability and cohesion of the Pakistan people (Iqtidar, 2011). The boundaries between religion and political goals are also often disrupted because political actors can easily use religious sentiments on their side in order to establish legitimacy and recruit supporters and develop influence within the state institutions (Zaman,

2018). Such manipulation is unhealthy as it destroys the processes of democracy and polarizes the society (Malik, 2002). Through an analysis of the 2014 Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Awami Tehreek sit-in and the 2017 Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan sit-in, the present research critically explores the topic of how religion is used in the misguided political mobilization in the Pakistani Dharna culture (Yusuf, 2015; Rana, 2019). This paper helps to comprehend the ethical and political ambiguity of the place of religion in the Pakistani politics in combination with showing how this misuse threatens the existing democratic regime in a society that is yet to go through its process of consolidation. The misuse of religion in the mobilization of politics based upon the Dharna culture deprives the democratic process and increases the polarization of the Pakistani society even more. This paper examines the abuse of the religious emotions in the form of Dharnas and how this has impacted the stability and the functioning of democratic Republic. There is a gap in the study on the misuse of religion by Dharna protesters in Pakistan even though religion is the key to identity and politics. Although Dharnas are valid democratic exercises, circumventing the process of democracy through the rhetoric of religion creates rebelliousness and weakens the credibility of an institution. Such manipulation rather moves governance and peace in society to the other end where there are heated confrontations instead of policy dialogue. Scanty academic research on this abuse to the Dharna culture justifies such a research to evaluate its consequences and give information to deal with its adverse impact in Pakistan. Available study has addressed political protests and religion in Pakistan but not systematized research on the usage of religion by Dharna culture in mobilization and story-telling. Not many studies exist in terms of comparative analysis between major Dharnas and in terms of their long-term democratic and social effects.

Research Objectives
1. To determine the influence of religion-based Dharna politics on the process of democracy, political stability and societal cohesion in Pakistan.
2. In order to carry out a comparative study of major Dharnas (e.g. of 2014 PTI-PAT sit in and 2017 TLP sit in) to establish similarities and difference in the misuse of religion to gain political mileage.
3. To analyze policy recommendations to discourage the abuse of religion in political mobilization without violating the democratic right to protest and express.

Research Questions
1. What are the consequences of Dharna politics based on religion to the institutions, governance and stability in the Pakistani society?
2. What has happened in the 2014 PTI-PAT Dharna and the more recent 2017 TLP Dharna in comparison to each other in terms of religious framing and mobilization rhetoric and how they have borne out politically?
3. What are the policy recommendations that can be given to discourage the abuse of religion to mobilize the political space?

Literature Review:
Religion and politics in Pakistan have been key factors of the country in its political developments with religion playing a major role as the source of legitimacy and further mobilization of masses (Nasr, 2001). Ideology governing Pakistan and post-Zia-ul-Haq Islamization event have institutionalized religion within the state, which gave political players entries to play religion politics and convert that into political advantages (Shaikh, 2009). This has resulted in a diffuse state of affairs that involves religion, identity, and politics and more likely than not, it has led to

the leveraging of religion in the political demonstrations i.e. Dharnas (sit-ins). Pakistan is also facing the Dharna culture being an effective method of political exercise, especially evident in the case of 2014 PTI-PAT sit-in that questioned the validity of elections and administration (Yusuf, 2015). Although the reason behind protest was mainly the allegations of electoral rigging, religious motifs were also used in a strategic manner to ensure that morale of the participant would be sustained, and legitimacy would be created among the conservative sectors of society (Shafqat, 2018). In the same way, the 2017 Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) sit-in was one of the clearest examples of the misuse of religion when demonstrations revolved around the emotionally high topic of blasphemy laws, thus, letting political forces play on the religious ground to oppress state institutions (Khalid, 2020; Rana, 2019). As Zaman (2018) points out, although religion may give moral bearings in the context of the public sphere, politicization of religion in the context of protests usually results in a more polarized society and the issue of intolerance that challenges social unity in the already divided society. It is exacerbated by transnational effects of religions and the spread of favoring politics based on identity across the world, which contributes to the encouragement of using the religious story as an effective tool of mobilization (Roy, 2004; Siddiqui, 2020).

It has been claimed in the recent research (Ahmed, 2024; Khan, 2025) that the mainstreaming of religiously based Dharna politics takes the focus on policy-based arguments and turns it on religious emotional perspectives, undermining democratic responsibility and taking the people off the topic of failure in governance. Moreover, according to Mehdi (2020), these strategies cause a vicious cycle of protests-oriented politics, undermining the development of institutionalized mechanisms of conflict resolving, which are critical to the process of democratic establishment. The presence of Dharna politics in Pakistan as a significant element of the democratic process became evident when the country witnessed such big protests as the PTI-PAT Dharna in 2014 that de-legitimized the election, proving that it was possible to play a role in the governance using the street (Yusuf, 2015; Khan, 2017). Despite the fact that Dharnas are constitutional means of protest (Haq, 2019), their links with religious discourse are further problematic in terms of the instrumentalization of social emotions and tremendous damage of the institutional procedure (Mehdi, 2020; Khan, 2025). The PTI-PAT Dharna of 2014 was largely based on accusation of the electoral corruption, but with certain references to religious elements, as well, to keep up the morale of the participants and appeal to the conservative layers of the society (Shafqat, 2018). Conversely, the 2017 Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) Dharna made the demands more specifically within religious terms, referring to the main (and the most ticklish subject) of the blasphemy laws to move the masses and control the state (Khalid, 2020; Rana, 2019). Such open appeal to the religious emotions under a political agenda is the prime example of the literary tactic of religiously exploiting evocative appeal to legitimize protest and build bargaining ability against the state (Ahmed, 2024). The media thus plays an important role in telling the story of Dharnas in Pakistan as the religious slogans tend to be overemphasized and the protests are recounted through a religious discourse, shaping it larger and more legitimate (Ali, 2018; Rehman, 2017). With the change of introducing electronic and social media, Dharnas have become spectacles, which support religiously loaded discourses and impact the policy response and public opinion (Khan, 2021).

Misuse of religion in political mobilization serves to destroy democratic institutions by avoiding the election and judicial proceedings and establishing an alternative system under which political disputes are resolved in the street, instead of institutional negotiations (Haq, 2019). Polarization of society, developing sectarianism and promoting intolerance, is one of the consequences of such

mobilizations, when political struggles are defined as disputes between religions (Malik, 2002; Zahid, 2018). Also, when Dharna protests are based on religion, they can empower extremists in a way that can endanger the writ of a state and disturb governance systems (Fair, 2015; Siddiqui, 2020).

Research Methodology
This study uses a qualitative design to examine the misuse of religion in Pakistan's Dharna culture (Creswell, 2014). A comparative case study of the 2014 PTI-PAT and 2017 TLP Dharnas will identify patterns in religious exploitation. Data collection involves document analysis of newspapers, speeches, social media, and reports, alongside semi-structured interviews with journalists, analysts, and Dharna participants using purposive sampling for relevance. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with NVivo will aid systematic coding and pattern identification. Ethical approval, informed consent, and participant anonymity will be ensured, maintaining integrity in data collection and reporting.

Discussion and Interpretations:
The culture of Dharna (sit-in) in Pakistan has created an important challenge that will threaten the democratic process and stability in the society due to the abuse of religion. Although Dharnas are regarded as a constitutional means of political protests, their growing convergence with religious discourses have enabled Dharnas to prove a potent vehicle of mass mobilization, sometimes (hiding upon democratic standards and institutional forms) evolved in the process (Shaikh, 2009; Yusuf, 2015). This part is the critical analysis of the way in which religion is strategically manipulated in Dharna politics in Pakistan taking into consideration the important cases, religious exploitation pattern, and its effects on the governance and social peace. Pakistan's politics is heavily influenced by religious narratives due to its ideological foundation and Islamization policies (Nasr, 2001; Zaman, 2018). Political leaders often use Islamic symbols to gain legitimacy and bypass procedural democratic methods (Iqtidar, 2011). In protests, religious discourses transform abstract political claims into moral imperatives, triggering emotional responses while sidelining policy debates (Roy, 2004; Ahmed, 2024). Religion's role in political mobilization can unify fragmented socio-economic groups, strengthening protest movements (Shaikh, 2009). However, it also fuels societal polarization by framing opponents as adversaries of religion, leading to intolerance and societal divisions (Siddiqui, 2020). Protest leaders leverage religious legitimacy to pressure politicians outside democratic channels, fostering confrontational politics in Pakistan (Mehdi, 2020; Haq, 2019). Groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have used religious sentiments, particularly around blasphemy, to mobilize mass protests and extract concessions from the state (Khalid, 2020; Rana, 2019). This manipulation undermines democratic principles, weakens institutions, and narrows policy discourse (Fair, 2015). Overall, the strategic use of religion in protests has made religiously driven political mobilization a destabilizing force in Pakistan's political landscape.

The Emergence of Dharna Culture as a Mode of Protests
Dharna culture has ensured in Pakistan a new society as a meaningful act of politics and primarily used as modes of resisting against the acknowledgment of elections, incompetency of governments, and policies (Khan, 2017). The PTI-PAT Dharna 2014 was one of them and it has been the precedent of such sit-ins proving that the people in numbers can accomplish wonders and bring the state to the negotiating table (Shafqat, 2018). However, the 2017 TLP Dharna brought a new significant aspect as this time religion was openly used to situate the demonstration within the rhetoric of protecting religious feelings, and this is how religious discourses have succeeded in

bringing together an ever-larger number of people and the state to yield concessions (Khalid, 2020; Rana, 2019).
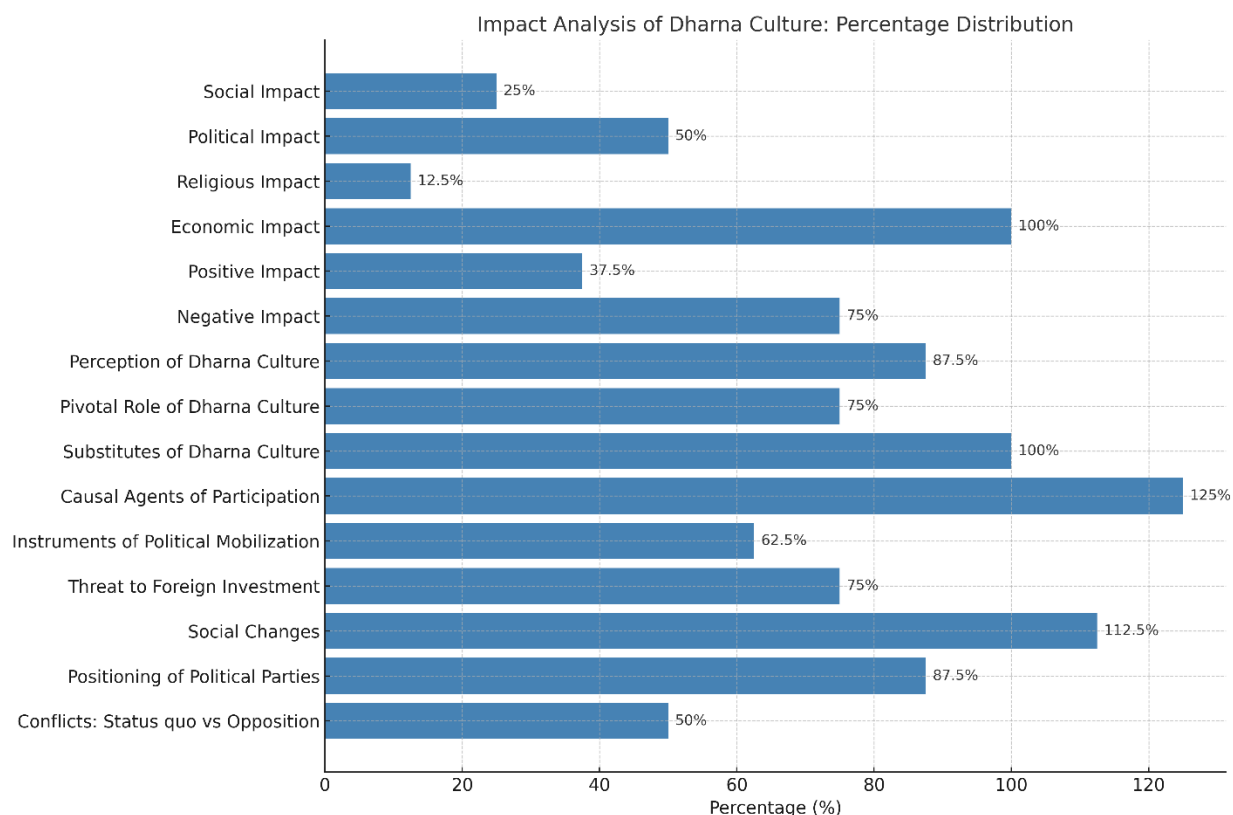

Figure No.1: The bar chart illustrates Dharna culture's varied societal and political impacts in Pakistan by percentage Distribution.

Comparative Analysis:

Case Study of PTI-PAT Dharna 2014 and TLP Dharna 2017
In Dharna in 2014, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) initiated a demonstration against the alleged mass rigging during the 2013 elections, citing the idea that framed it as a democratic accountability and electoral reform movement (Yusuf, 2015). In order to keep its protest going as long as it lasted (successfully spanning the 126 days), leaders Imran Khan and Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri filled their rhetoric with Islamic notions such as haq (truth) and insaaf (justice) and presented the protest as a religious cause in which people needed to resist corruption and oppression, thus interpreting the act of participating as part of the moral obligation (Shafqat, 2018). Friday prayers, collective duas as well as mentioning Islamic history kept the participants emotionally involved and made the protest associated with Islamic principles, which attracts the audience among conservatives, as well as middle-class people (Haq, 2019; Mehdi, 2020). This religious framing rendered protesting protestors disciplined and the governance illegitimate, though it can be said that this religious framing was not as radical as the ones observable later. The Dharna 2014 showed how political mobilization can validate itself even through foundations which are rather subtle in terms of religious contexts, this can sway moral consciousness of the society and institutional power in Pakistan politics. The 2017 Dharna by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) placed focus on the religious mobilization as an alleged manipulation of the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat clause in the electoral oath, which was represented as the assault on Islam

(Khalid, 2020). The TLP leaders invoked the religious slogans, the law of blasphemy and even fatwas to explain that behavior as a religious endeavor as a test of faith, and it allowed transforming the political dispute into a popular religious grievance (Rana, 2019; Ahmed, 2024). Such appeal to emotions (as a religious one) proved to be efficient in boosting the numbers in participation as the huge crowds attracted beyond the organizational limits of TLP were possible because of such strong emotional appeal around the issue within Pakistani society (Siddiqui, 2020). Spiritual atmosphere, created by religious depictions, such as naats or mass recitations, added to the legitimacy of the protest among the participants (Rehman, 2017). State compromises to the demands of TLP indicated how the religious discourse could turn state policies around and revealed the institutional flaws over religiously mediated mobilizations (Khan, 2021). The pattern can be seen in the 2017 TLP Dharna, which was leaped when a specific religious community was strategically misused to intensify a protest using emotional religious sentiments and exerting pressure on the state infrastructure and questioning democratic procedures in Pakistan. The similarity evidences ongoing biases regarding the misuse of religion in Dharna politics, where political players oversimplify complicated problems, presenting movements as a moral and religious obligation, omitting a policy discussion and democratic responsibility in the process (Khan, 2019; Mehdi, 2020). Media highlights such stories, which an audience may pay attention to outside protesters locations (Ali, 2018; Rehman, 2017). Social media also makes the process of mobilization even quicker on an emotional level building echo chambers that escalate religiously driven protests (Khan, 2021).

Influences to Democratic Processes and Governance
In Pakistan, the Dharna culture is plagued with the exploitation of religion, which undermines the democratic set up since it moves the conflict resolution mechanisms to the street protests rather than the constitutional mechanisms such as parliament and courts (Haq, 2019). When protest includes appealing to religion, the official responsibility and able-bodied government activities are pushed faster, which destroys the foundation of the legislative process and develops a behavioral norm in the conflict resolution, that political disputes can be successfully solved with a threat of mass protests, which diminishes the power of institutions (Mehdi, 2020; Fair, 2015). The trend puts hesitation in the step of trusting in the constitutional means, and it also encourages a culture of religiously bundled street power transcending governance (Ahmed, 2024).

The Implications in the Society: Polarization and Intolerance
Religious framing in Dharna protests polarizes Pakistani society, dividing it into perceived guardians of faith and adversaries, limiting open discussion and equating dissent with disloyalty or blasphemy (Roy, 2004; Siddiqui, 2020; Zahid, 2018; Zaman, 2018). The use of religious tropes normalizes extremist rhetoric, increasing intolerance towards minorities and deepening sectarian divides (Fair, 2015; Siddiqui, 2020). This environment fosters radicalism, especially among youth, who view participation as religious activism (Khan, 2021). Long-term, this undermines social cohesion, encourages suspicion, and elevates religious orthodoxy over pluralism and tolerance (Ahmed, 2024). The selective application of the religion in The Dharna culture enables the politicians to evade the democratic processes by applying pressure on the state by mobilizing the masses. When we compare the PTI-PAT in 2014 and the TLP Dharna during 2017, one can notice that there has been a shift in the particular approach specifically, that of implicit moral motives to explicit religious mobilization, which negatively affects the process of democratic consolidation and governance. These dynamics should be understood by policymakers and scholars who would like to make democracy stronger without restricting the manifestation of religion in public.

Analysis, Conclusion and Recommendations:

The PTI-PAT Dharna had implicit religious symbols that put the protest in the form of a holy fight against injustice to acquire legitimacy and attract mass support despite being a nonviolent protest. Conversely, TLP Dharna (2017) has been explicitly religious based in its rhetoric and has focused on the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat clause and subsequent fatwas to make the protest an active religious mission. They both mobilized using religion which is a very strategic way of rallying people and pressurizing the state beyond the democratic process as religious symbols are unused in a misrepresented way in the Pakistani Dharna culture to evade institutions.
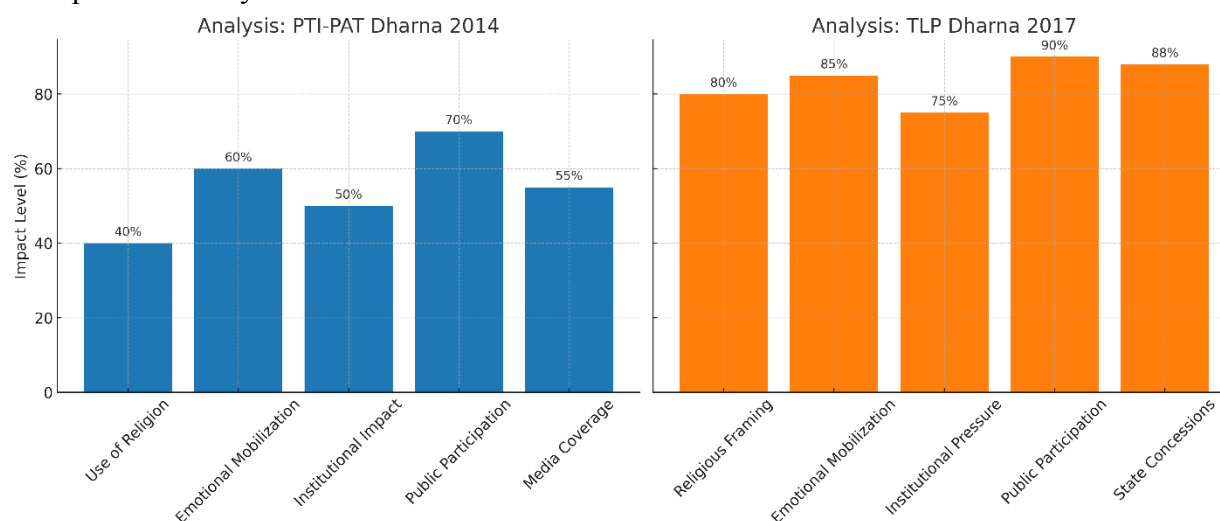

Figure No.2: In this figure, the analysis of 2014 and 2017 Dharna is explained

The two bar charts examine the similarities of the PTI-PAT Dharna (2014) and the TLP Dharna (2017) that have in common the huge numbers of people involved while comparing it in terms of campus and religious framing and institutional pressure. The PTI-PAT Dharna involved a moderate level of the use of religion by concentrating on political grievances whereas the TLP Dharna involved high level of use of religion by mobilizing through emotional appeal because of which it was able to obtain larger concessions on the part of the state. These two scenes are good examples of how religious emotions can make a complicated political matter turn into an emotionally seductive story that uses little institutional processes and lures various social groups into uniting under an umbrella of religious opinion. Such a plan also creates the environment of hostile protests, undermining institutional powers and democratic stability through the religious appeal that questions the power of the state. The frequent abuse of religion during protests creates further division in the society with protesting being turned into disloyalty to religion and intolerance to politics. This kind of setting erodes governance, builds daylights, and triggers greater vulnerability of societies in Pakistan towards radicalization destabilizing the democratic and social setup of Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study makes a conclusion that the exploitation of religion to mobilization in the Dharna culture of Pakistan is encouraging the mobilization and the concessions of the state, but it damages democracy, further ravages societal divisions, and standardizes unfriendly politics. The PTI-PAT and TLP Dharna comparison indicates how employing the motif of religious fortifies the movement and circumvents the institutions of the law. This is one of the pressing reasons why religious manipulation in Pakistan politics should be curbed in a way that safeguards democracy

in the country without necessarily putting religious feelings into oblivion. This statement denies policy debate and creates intolerance, undermining togetherness and pluralism in the society.

The results indicate that there is a need to reinforce democratic systems that would resolve grievances prior to causing them to lead into religiously motivated protests. The Election Commission must prohibit the religious slogans to be used in the campaigns to avoid their political misuse. There should be the support of civic education based on democracy and pluralism to curb emotional manipulation. Its use of religious leaders to discourage the use of religion to encourage protests and the use of the media to discourage the extremist narratives is very useful. The government ought to provide stable forums of representation to the civil society where they could express grievances without using Dharnas as the forms of political expression.

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