

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR AMPLIFICATION OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES IN PAKISTAN - A CASE STUDY OF TLP

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Abstract

This paper addresses the significance of social media platforms, specifically Youtube and X, in promoting and amplifying extremist narratives in Pakistan. A case study of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is undertaken to understand how social media platforms can be employed to propagate and amplify extremist narratives. The paper presents a brief historical study of the origins and evolution of TLP. Analytics of four official YouTube accounts associated with TLP are studied to gauge the audience reach of TLP's content. Moreover, archival data of multiple trends on X (formerly twitter) promoted by TLP is also examined. The timelines of these trends are also studied to find a correlation between these trends and on ground events related to TLP. This study finds out that as of Oct 2024 the cumulative subscriber count of the four YouTube channels run by TLP is 1.37 million, while video views count is 172.43 million. This indicates that the actual extent of TLP's audience reach must be much higher if TLP's fan pages are also incorporated. A temporal analysis of archival twitter trends data related to TLP reveals that TLP's online activity closely coincides with key events involving the group at the time. The paper also examines the role of engagement algorithms and weak content moderation policies of social media platforms in amplification of extremist content online.

Keywords: Social Media, Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Extremism, Regulation, Algorithms

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Introduction

Extrémism is a broad and subjective term and does not have a fixed definition.¹ However, in political and religious contexts, extremism is generally defined as ideologies, activities, and narratives that are outside of normative and acceptable social behavior.² In case of Pakistan, extremist narratives could be regarded as those ideologies or belief systems that compete against state's ideology and rule of law.³ Such narratives have existed in Pakistan which have even culminated in armed sectarian, ethnic and religious conflicts at times. For example, extremist narratives based on ethnic identities played a key role in the separation of East Pakistan and continue to challenge the national security of Pakistan.⁴ Similarly, on multiple occasions, extremist narratives based on sectarian identities have led to Shia-Sunni conflicts in different parts of the country.⁵ With the advent of modern tools of communications, especially social media, the dissemination of such narratives has now become relatively easier and precise.

With the onset of social media platforms, access to information and its dissemination has become easier and quicker. In Pakistan, the number of social media users has grown exponentially over the years. In January 2024, the number of internet users in Pakistan stood at 111.0 million (45.7 percent of the total population), while 71.70 million (29.5 percent of total population) are active on social media platforms.⁶ The number of internet users rose 24 million, equal to an almost 24 percent, in last one year.⁷ However, growing social media use has also led to an increase in the circulation and dissemination of content which may be driven by a particular agenda. For example, a user survey conducted in 25 countries including Pakistan indicated that 44 percent of the respondents admitted

¹ Andrej Sotlar, Some Problems with a Definition and Perception of Extremism within a Society, December 2004, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/Mesko/208033.pdf>.

² Muhammad Rana, Defining Terrorism in Pakistan: The Supreme Court's Judgment - a Way Forward for Parliament (2020), 3-4.

³ Dr Minhas Majeed Khan, "Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: An Appraisal of Pakistan's CVE Initiatives," *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2015): 23-26, https://www.issi.org.pk/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/SS_No_4_2015_Dr_Minhas.pdf.

⁴ Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8-21.

⁵ International Crisis Group, "Pakistan: Sectarian Violence," Crisis Group Asia Report No. 327, September 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/>

⁶ "Digital 2024: Pakistan," DataReportal - Global Digital Insights, last modified February 16, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-pakistan>.

⁷ "Digital 2024: Pakistan," DataReportal.

to be influenced by fake news online.⁸ Fake or inauthentic news plays a key role in shaping partisan content, which has infiltrated the digital space in the modern world and Pakistan is no exception to this. In order to gauge the degree to which social media platforms are used to promote partisan and potentially extremist content in Pakistan, constantly evolving online presence of Tehreek-e Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a politico-religious outfit of Pakistan, offers a suitable case study.

The origins of TLP can be traced back to the formation of an alliance between different Barelvi-led ideological religious groups known as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasoolallah (TLYR).⁹ The four Barelvi groups within TLYR included Tehreek-e-Sirat-e Mustaqeem led by Asraf Jalali, Sunni Tehrik led by Sarwat Ejaz Qadri, Aalmi Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat led by Pir Afzal Qadri, and Anjuman-e-Fidayan-e-Khatam-e-Nabuwwat headed by Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi.¹⁰ However, internal rifts led to the dismemberment of TLYR and Allama Khadim Rizvi came out as a prominent politico-religious leader of a new brand of Barelvi activism under the banner of TLP.¹¹ Over the past few years, TLP has risen as a mass politico-religious organization with a considerable number of followers. It has repeatedly staged sit-ins and protests against multiple governments on different occasions.¹² TLP has generally used two broad issues to build its narrative: Blasphemy and Islamophobia. As a result of these narratives, TLP has been able to promote extremist viewpoints inside the country and hate against the West. TLP has led violent and non-violent agitations against the elected governments on multiple occasions since its rise in 2017 till date.¹³ On each occasion, TLP was able to extract multiple concessions from the government and state institutions. Social media is one of the major tools used by TLP for propagating narrative and increasing its audience through targeted trends, posts and videos. Therefore, TLP offers an important case study for analyzing prevalent tactics of organized social media use aimed at amplifying political and extremist agendas in Pakistan. Analytics of four official YouTube accounts associated with TLP are studied to gauge the audience reach of TLP's content. Moreover, archival data of multiple trends on X promoted by TLP

⁸ CIGI and IPSOS, "Internet Security & Trust," Internet Society, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/>

⁹ Ihasan Yilmaz and Kainat Shakil, "Religious Populism and Vigilantism: The Case of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan," *Populism and Politics*, January 23, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0001>.

¹⁰ Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: An emerging right-wing threat to Pakistan's democracy," South Asia Source, *Atlantic Council*, January 15, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource>

¹³ Farrukh K. Pitafi, "How TLP Came into Being?," *The Express Tribune*, last modified November 19, 2021.

is also examined. The timelines of these trends are also studied to find a correlation between these trends and on ground events related to TLP. Based on this understanding, evolving socio-political impacts of weakly moderated digital space in Pakistan are also examined.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative analysis includes the study of on-ground political movements and protests staged by TLP and the narratives they use to promote their political activities. The quantitative analysis is undertaken by examining four official YouTube accounts associated with TLP along with multiple trends on X promoted by TLP that closely coincide with on-ground events related to TLP. Analysis of YouTube channels is carried out through the public database of the tool *Social Blade*, which provides insights and analytics for any content creator or YouTube channel. On the other hand, most of the TLP accounts on X have now been suspended; however, archival data on Twitter trends are accessed through the website *Twitter Trending Archives*. Analysis of archival data of Twitter trends is important to understand the temporal digital activity of TLP, which closely correlates with key events involving the group at the time. The collected data is also triangulated to assess the complementarity of the increased social media activity with the on-ground activities, hence allowing for better understanding of how social media could be used to amplify certain potentially extremist narratives.

However, the study faced two major limitations. Firstly, archival data of X trends prior to November 2018 was not accessible, which reduced the ability to analyze the Twitter activity of TLP since the time its digital footprint started to grow. Secondly, TLP's activity on X and some other platforms was censored from 2022 onwards, with many of their accounts either suspended or removed from the platform. To compensate for the second limitation, the study relies on qualitative data from 2023 and 2024 to analyze the continued presence of TLP in socio-political domains. It is also important to note that TLP's use of social media is not limited to only YouTube and X and in fact, the group uses a wide range of other platforms including Dailymotion, Vimeo, WhatsApp, Telegraph, Tik Tok, and Facebook. However, the reach of some of these platforms is low compared to YouTube and X. Moreover, access to user data for Facebook and encrypted data of instant messaging apps including WhatsApp and Telegram is difficult. Therefore, the scope of this study has been limited to YouTube and X.

Literature Review

The role of the internet in spreading extremist narratives across the globe is becoming profound. Social media platforms are increasingly

becoming a tool for the propagation of extremist narratives. Social media was initially conceived as a digital ecosystem that would enable its users to create and share their content with a wider audience.¹⁴ However, this, in turn, paved the way for the creation and dissemination of specific, tailored and agenda driven content, transforming social media platforms into a tool for political campaigning.¹⁵ With time, social media platforms also became a tool for the propagation and promotion of extremist and hateful content.¹⁶ Fake news, propaganda, radicalization and political violence have now become rampant across social media platforms.¹⁷

The internet could serve as a key platform for radicalization as it has become a “key source of information, communication and propaganda for their extremist beliefs.” It also serves as the space for virtual interaction between like-minded people, which could often confirm their existing extremist beliefs. Many extremists do not consider internet as an alternative to in-person or face-to-face communication but rather a complementary avenue which helps engage with a wider network of audiences.¹⁸ These findings indicate that internet, or more specifically social media platforms, could indeed serve as a tool for propagation and amplification of extremism. However, there is a need to study how these platforms are being used for such purposes in the context of Pakistan.

Mozilla Foundation conducted a research study in 2021 by the name of *YouTube Regrets* to understand how YouTube’s recommendation algorithm works and what type of content it pushes. It is a crowd sourced study that involved 37,380 users from around 91 countries.¹⁹ The report concluded that around 71 percent of the content containing violence, misinformation, and hate speech was recommended by the YouTube algorithm.²⁰ The report also revealed that the rate of such content was 60

¹⁴ Terry Daugherty, Matthew S. Eastin, and Laura Bright, “Exploring Consumer Motivations for Creating User-Generated Content,” *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 8, no.2, 2008. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2008.10722139>

¹⁵ Jenny Bronstein and Noa Aharony, “Personal and Political Elements of the use of Social Networking Sites,” *Information Research* 20, no. 1, 2015.

¹⁶ Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, Diana R. Grant, and Chau-Pu Chiang, “Hate Online: A Content Analysis of Extremist Internet Sites,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 3, no. 1, 2003. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2003.00013.x>

¹⁷ Keipi et. al., “Exposure to Online Hate Material and Subjective Well-being: A Comparative Study of American and Finnish Youth,” *Online Information Review* 42, no. 1, 2018.

¹⁸ Gill et. al., “Terrorist Use of the Internet by the Numbers: Quantifying Behaviors, Patterns, and Processes,” *Criminology & Public Policy* 16, no. 1, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12249>.

¹⁹ Mozilla Foundation, *YouTube Regrets: A Crowdsourced Investigation into YouTube’s Recommendation Algorithm*, Mozilla Foundation, 2019.

²⁰ Ibid

percent higher in non-English speaking countries.²¹ This offers valuable insights into the challenges posed by the use of social media platforms by extremist groups for the promotion of their narratives. This challenge becomes compounded in a country like Pakistan, where content moderation of social media platforms might be comparatively difficult due to language barriers and low digital literacy. Moreover, it also shows that the reach of hateful content might be significantly higher than that of other content due to the role of the recommendation algorithms of different social media platforms.

Pakistan faces a similar issue of social media abuse by extremist actors. With the abuse of social media platforms, the likelihood of violence and radicalization have increased across the Pakistani political arena.²² Akram offers insights into the religio-political use of social media by PTI and TLP to promote their political ideologies and agenda.²³ Both PTI and TLP employed social media platforms to promote their narrative and organize mass protests, sometimes even violent. Their social media campaigns were significantly directed towards youth, which the study triangulates by increasing violent behaviours exhibited by the youth during the protests and marches of both these parties. The unabated propaganda fed through these platforms was specifically used for election campaigns by both parties while defaming their political opponents. The common themes outlined by the study in the misuse of social media platforms by both the parties included calls for change to create a state like Madina, history of violent protests during their evolution, and only their respective leaders being able to bring all the required changes. These social media campaigns were also significant in creating radical forces within the youth, who considered itself at the margins of political landscape.

Paracha (2020) explores the evolution of Barelvism- the biggest sectarian doctrine of Pakistan in terms of followers. Paracha also discusses the relationship of Sufism with Barelvism and how the latter has adopted some of the key symbols and slogans of Sufism over the years. The book also investigates in length the Barelvi and Deobandi's ways of life, which have played a crucial role shaping in people's lives in Pakistan. The book also narrates the relationship between the country, people, state, and sub-sects and the modification of this relationship over the years. In order to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Muhammad Akbar and Aasima Safdar, "Politics of Hate and Social Media: Thematic Analysis of Political Hate Discourses on Facebook," *Global Social Science Review* 8, no. 2, 2023. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023\(VIII-II\)](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023(VIII-II))

²³ Muhammad Akram, Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, Muhammad Ayaz Naseem, "A Comparative Study of Social Media's Religiopolitical Use by Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)," *Canadian Social Science* 20, no.1, 2024. DOI: 10.3968/13292

contextualize the evolution and rise of TLP, Paracha gives a detailed historical account of its predecessor groups, including Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), Sunni Tehreek (ST), All India Sunni Conference (AISC), and Jamaat-e-Ahle Sunnat. Paracha states that while Barelvism has always been the most followed sect of Islam in Pakistan, it has never been defined as a cohesive and unified doctrine.

Paracha's work offers insights into the events that have led to the rise and popularity of TLP in Pakistan. It is also helpful in recognizing the socio-political patterns associated with Barelvism in the region. Paracha's work is also useful in understanding the historical evolution of Barelvi groups in the country that later became predecessors of TLP. Such an understanding is important to identify the narratives used by TLP for political mobilization.

Basit, in his paper, explores the evolution and political activism of the TLP as a religio-political group in the country. Basit explains how TLP has transformed from a protest movement to a political party while retaining its character as a movement. Basit notes that the structure of TLP is hybrid to such an extent that it becomes difficult to differentiate the religious movement from the political party. Basit also observes that TLP has been successful in asserting itself in Pakistan's political-religious arena over the last few years. TLP has been able to rise in its stature mainly by championing the cause of *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* (finality of Muhammad's prophethood) and *Namoos-e-Risalat* (honor of the Prophet Muhammad). Basit also discusses how TLP utilizes the tactics of protests and agitation to shape its political agenda. Moreover, TLP also relies on its political structures to demand or halt policies that seem detrimental to its interests. Basit believes that TLP has emerged as a by-product of post-9/11 developments in the religious and political landscape of Pakistan. Moreover, shifting trends of state patronage towards religious groups has also played a key role in the rise of TLP. Basit's work illustrates that TLP relies mainly on its protest movement to gather support, therefore, its activity on social media is important to understand the role of social media platforms in the promotion of its narratives.²⁴

In their report, Waldman and Verga attempt to offer measures for countering violent extremist activities on social media and the internet. The report defines violent extremism as "destructive actions or support for such actions undertaken by groups or individuals formally or informally affiliated with them, in the name of "extreme" political or

²⁴ Abdul Basit (2020) Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:3, 374-389, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2020.1812395

religious ideals.”²⁵ The report explains that propagandist material is disseminated by violent extremist groups on social media in order to get new recruits. It further elaborates that extremist organizations gather recruits on social media through online exposure to and internalization of extremist ideologies. Moreover, the report states that various extremist groups organize their activities on social media as it offers a simple and free tool for gaining reach to a huge audience over large areas. In the context of TLP’s use of social media, it is important to understand how it has leveraged different social media platforms to not only convey its narrative to a larger audience but also to organize its rallies and protests in the country on multiple occasions. The report also offers viable measures for countering violent extremists online that could offer effective lessons in the context of Pakistan as well.

The following section traces the origin and evolution of Barelvi groups, especially TLP, from a religious group to a major religio-political force in the country. The section also discusses how TLP employs social media to further its political ideology within society.

Origins and Evolution of TLP

TLP is a far-right Islamist political party of Pakistan with its ideological roots in the Barelvi sect of Sunni Islam. Barelvism has always been the sect of majority of Muslims in Pakistan and historically there have been many different barelvi groups in Pakistan including Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), Sunni Tehreek (ST), and Jamaat e Ahle Sunnat. However, these groups have not been able to unite to form a significant political force in the country until the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasoolallah (TLYR).²⁶ TLYR was a coalition of prominent Barelvi groups of the country, and it later became the predecessor of TLP. This rise of the Barelvi activism, especially the rise of TLP, began with the case of Aasia Bibi- a Christian woman awaiting death row for Blasphemy- and Salman Taseer, former Governor Punjab.²⁷ A session’s court in Punjab’s Nankana Sahib awarded death penalty to Aasia Bibi over the charges of Blasphemy; however, Salman Taseer met Asia and criticized the country’s Blasphemy laws for being used for malignant purposes. This led to a series of condemnations, demands for Taseer’s removal from the post of Governor

²⁵ Suzanne Waldman and Simona Verga, *Countering Violent Extremism: A Canadian Perspective*, Defence Research and Development Canada, 2016, https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc262/p805091_A1b.pdf.

²⁶ Ihasan Yilmaz and Kainat Shakil, “Religious Populism and Vigilantism: The Case of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan,” *Populism and Politics*, January 23, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0001>

²⁷ Sushant Sareen, “Tehrik-E-Labbaik Pakistan: The New Face of Barelvi Activism,” *Occasional Papers*, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), September 15, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/>.

and even Taseer being labeled an apostate by the Aalmi Jamaat Ahle Sunnat through a fatwa.²⁸ On January 4, 2011, Taseer was killed by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri. Initial investigation of Mumtaz Qadri's case revealed his connections to Barelvi extremist narratives. Mumtaz Qadri himself confessed that he was encouraged to murder Taseer by two Barelvi clerics who deemed Taseer as *Wajib ul Qatl* (deserving to be killed) for his comments against the Blasphemy laws.²⁹

Mumtaz Qadri became popular amongst Barelvi organisations of the country, with scores of lawyers volunteering to fight his case. At one point, more than 90 lawyers were present in the courtroom to defend Mumtaz Qadri.³⁰ This trial served as the beginning of the extremist political chapter in the history of Barelvism in Pakistan. A movement started as *Thereek Rihai Mumtaz Qadri* (Movement to Free Mumtaz Qadri), which later became an amalgamation of several Barelvi-led ideological, religious groups known as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasoolallah (TLYR).³¹ The four Barelvi groups within TLYR included Tehreek-e-Sirat-e Mustaqeem, Sunni Tehrik, Aalmi Tanzeem Ahl-e-Sunnat, and Anjuman-e-Fidayan-e-Khatam-e-Nabuwwat.³² At this point, a new leader emerged as the face of TLYR, Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi. He toured the country to gain support for his movement and became the driving force of the Barelvi politics inside the country.³³ However, the internal fragmentations led to the dismemberment of TLYR, with Khadim Rizvi coming out as the sole leader of this new brand of Barelvi activism under the banner of TLP.³⁴

TLP showed its street power for the first time as a separate entity in 2017 by blocking Faizabad, an entry point to the capital, Islamabad. Thousands of people staged a sit-in at Faizabad led by Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi to protest against a proposed change to the law of oath related to the finality of the Prophethood.³⁵ The newly emerged party was able to stage a sit-in for 21 days, completely halting the life in the twin cities. The show of force by TLP forced the government to not only repeal the changes made to the oath declaration but also remove the federal law

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Amir Mir, "Police unable to arrest or interrogate the two mullahs who encouraged Mumtaz Qadri to kill Governor Taseer," *Pakistan Blogzinw*, January 24, 2011, <https://pakistanblogzine.wordpress.com/2011/01/24/>

³⁰ Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan."

³¹ Ihasan Yilmaz and Kainat Shakil, "Religious Populism and Vigilantism: The Case of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan," *Populism and Politics*, January 23, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0001>

³² Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan."

³³ Sushant Sareen, "Tehrik-E-Labbaik Pakistan: The New Face of Barelvi Activism."

³⁴ Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan."

³⁵ Asad Hashim, "Anti-blasphemy protesters block entrance to Islamabad," November 13, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/>

minister, Zahid Hamid. A deal was brokered between the government and TLP, which saw TLP protestors dispersing.³⁶ While their street power grew exponentially, their social media presence also rose simultaneously. The following sections will look into the TLP's social media activity from 2018 onwards.

TLP's Social Media Use

TLP has regularly used various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Vimeo, Dailymotion, and YouTube. This could be observed by the official channels associated with TLP on YouTube, which also include links to its channels on Dailymotion, Vimeo, along with WhatsApp contact details. TLP regularly uses these platforms to disseminate its ideological, social, and political messages as evident by its content across different social media platforms. Moreover, since TLP has been involved in staging mass demonstrations and protests against sitting governments of the time, its social media activity has been crucial in coordinating logistics, communicating its demands and to organize and motivate its supporters across the country for its cause.³⁷

In order to critically analyze the extent to which TLP has been active on social media platforms during some of its key political movements and protests, this section examines TLP's use of YouTube and X. It is important to note that TLP's use of social media platforms is not limited to just YouTube and X and most of the TLP associated accounts on X and Facebook have now been suspended. Nonetheless, TLP related channels on YouTube and groups on instant messaging apps including WhatsApp and Telegram are still active. However, access to encrypted data related to TLP activity on instant messaging apps including WhatsApp and Telegram is difficult. Therefore, this study mainly relies on the analysis of the YouTube channels and X. Analysis of YouTube channels is carried out through Social Blade. On the other hand, as stated earlier, the TLP accounts on X have now been suspended, however, archival data on Twitter trends can be accessed through *Twitter Trending Archives*.

YouTube

Over the years, TLP's use of social media platforms became sophisticated and elaborate.³⁸ The 2018 election results highlighted the greater engagement of TLP with the masses around the country. During

³⁶ Amir Waseem and Munawer Azeem, "Faizabad sit-in ends as army brokers deal," November 29, 2017.

³⁷ Sushant Sareen, "Tehrik-E-Labbaik Pakistan: The New Face of Barelvi Activism."

³⁸ Muhammad Akram, Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, Muhammad Ayaz Naseem, "A Comparative Study of Social Media's Religiopolitical Use by Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)."

this time, TLP employed social media platforms to promote its political campaigns in order to garner votes and increase its vote bank. As a result, in the 2018 elections, TLP was able to secure 2.2 million votes, making it the fourth-largest party in terms of vote count.³⁹ Famous for being an effective orator, Khadim Hussain Rizvi's main medium of communication became TLP's YouTube channels. *Table 1* shows statistics related to four YouTube channels officially run by the organization and established at different times. The average weekly subscriber and views gain represent the data from September 2023 to October 2024.

Table 1: Official YouTube Channels of TLP and their Statistics

Name of Channel	Subscribers	Video Views (Cumulated)	Weekly Average Subscribers Gain	Weekly Average Views Gain
@AllamaKhadimHussainRizvi9263	1,060,000	143,767,892	1,842	210,458
@HafizSaadHussainRizvi	46,700	2,229,132	182	2,018
@LabbaikMediaCell313	189,000	20,211,376	368	41,230
@TehreekLabbaikPakistanofficial	80,100	6,224,649	608	67,556
Total Cumulative Subscribers and Views	1,375,800	172,433,049	3000	321,262

Source: Based on data sourced from Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/>

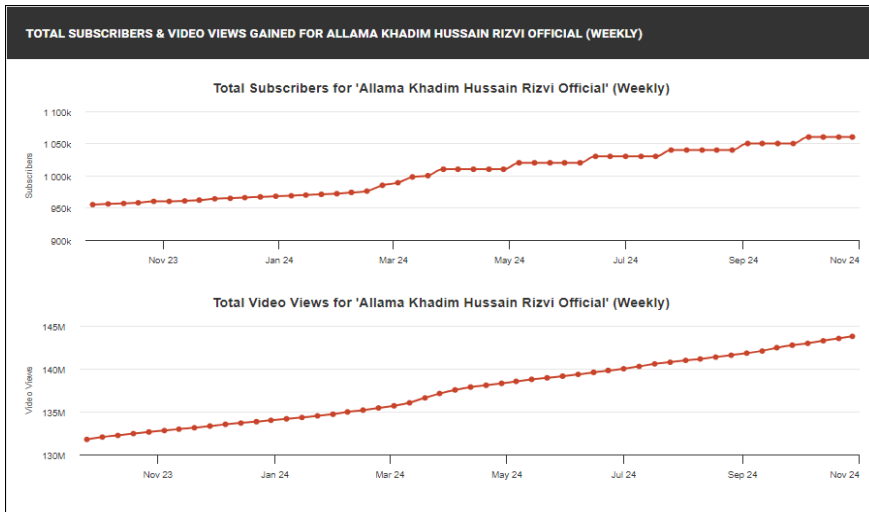
Established on May 29, 2016, the oldest YouTube channel, @AllamaKhadimHussainRizvi9263 has since gained 1.06 million followers, amassing a cumulative total view of 143,767,892 on its videos. The weekly average increase in subscribers for the channel from 25 September 2023 to 28 October 2024 stood at 1842, while the average weekly count for the video views for the channel stood at 210,458 views. *Figure 1* highlights the weekly and monthly trends for the subscribers and video count views for the channel.

After the death of Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, his son, Allama Saad Hussain Rizvi, assumed the leadership of TLP. Although his YouTube channel has not amassed a great number of subscribers compared to his father, statistical analysis of his channel presents a worthy insight into the continued presence and penetration of TLP's reach within the society. Saad Rizvi's official YouTube channel @HafizSaadHussainRizvi has 46,700

³⁹ Muhammad Akram, Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, Muhammad Ayaz Naseem, "A Comparative Study of Social Media's Religiopolitical Use by Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)."

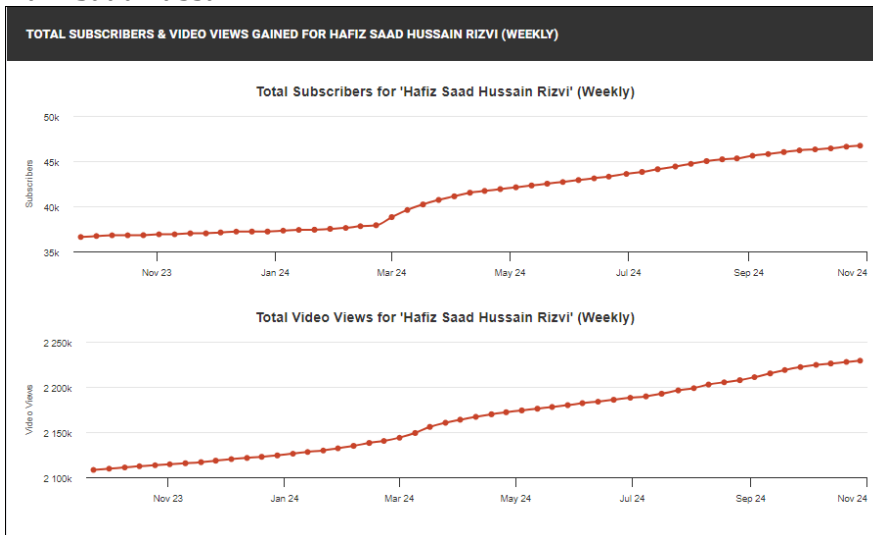
subscribers and a total video views count of 2,229,132. The weekly average increase in subscribers for the channel remains 182, while the views count average increase stands at 2,018. *Figure 2* highlights the average weekly trend in the subscribers and video views count for the channel.

Figure 1: Weekly Subscribers and Video Views on YouTube Channel @AllamaKhadimHussainRizvi9263.



Source: Data sourced from Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/>.

Figure 2: Weekly Subscribers and Video Views on YouTube Channel @HafizSaadHussainRizvi.

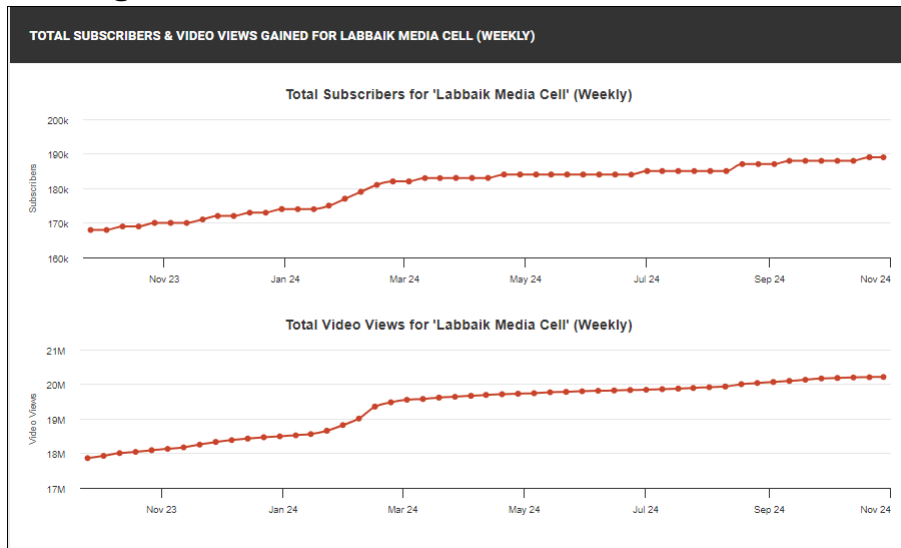


Source: Data sourced from Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/>

TLP’s official YouTube channel, @LabbaikMediaCell313, was created in 2021 and has a total of 189,000 subscribers and 20,211,376 video views. The average weekly increase in subscribers for the channel is

368, and the average weekly increase in the video views is 41,230. *Figure 3* below shows the subscribers' average trend and channel video counts.

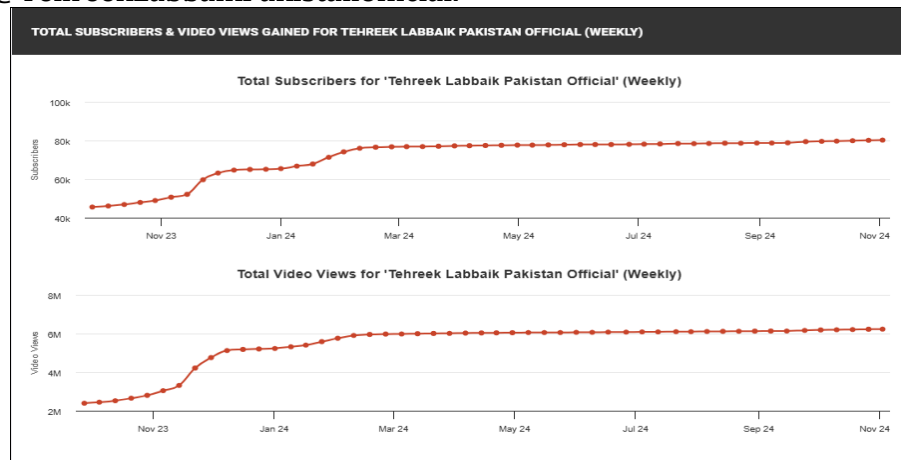
Figure: 3 Weekly Subscribers and Video Views on YouTube Channel @LabbaikMediaCell313.



Source: Data sourced from Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/>

The fourth official YouTube channel of TLP, @TehreekLabbaikPakistanofficial was created on November 23, 2022. In just two years, the channel has gained a subscriber count of 80,100 and a video views count of 6,224,649. The average weekly subscribers and views gained are 608 and 67,556 respectively. *Figure 4* represents the weekly trend of gains in subscribers and video views of the channel.

Figure 4: Weekly Subscribers and Video Views on YouTube Channel @TehreekLabbaikPakistanofficial.



Source: Data sourced from Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/>

Taking the cumulative total of the four YouTube channels run by TLP, the total subscriber count stands at 1.37 million. The cumulative video views count stands at 172.43 million. The average weekly cumulative increase in subscribers and video views stand at 3000 and 321,262 respectively. The continuously increasing video views along with the cumulative subscriber count show that TLP has a significant presence at the YouTube platform and utilizes it effectively to amplify the reach of their narrative across the country.

X (Formerly Twitter) TLP's X activity coincides with the majority of their on-ground protests and actions. However, the lack of archival data prior to November 2018 limits the analysis of TLP's X activity during various events since its rise in the 2017 Faizabad protest. However, for the purpose of understanding the narrative and political agenda of TLP, major on-ground actions of TLP leading up to November 2018 are discussed below. For events of November 2018 and onwards, on-grounds actions are triangulated by TLP's X activity as well.

TLP Demands Fulfillment of November 2017 Agreement: On April 12, 2018, TLP took to the streets and organized protests all over the country, blocking several highways. These protests affected several cities of the country including Lahore, Rawalpindi, Hyderabad, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Mandi Bahuddin, Karachi and Peshawar. The protests continued for 12 days and ended with an agreement between the government and the TLP.⁴⁰

Supreme Court Acquits Aasia Bibi of Blasphemy Charges: On October 30, 2018, the Supreme Court of Pakistan acquitted Aasia Bibi of the Blasphemy charges quoting: "*Keeping in mind the evidence produced by the prosecution against the alleged blasphemy committed by the appellant, the prosecution has categorically failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt.*"⁴¹ The news of Aasia's acquittal was not received well within the religious circles, especially by TLP, whose foundations were rooted in the case. Once again, the whole country saw violent protests, with TLP leading the charge, forcing the government to sign another five-point agreement to submit a review petition against Aasia Bibi's acquittal and putting her name on the Exit Control List (ECL).⁴²

Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Booked for Treason: In November 2018, Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi was taken into custody by the government, who termed it as a "protective custody." However, on December 2, 2018, the government announced the trial of Khadim Hussain Rizvi under the charges of treason and incitement of violence against the

⁴⁰ "7 protests, 7 agreements: A timeline of TLP protests," *Geo News*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/>

⁴¹ Haseeb Bhatti, "Supreme Court acquits Aasia Bibi, orders immediate release," *Dawn*, October 30, 2018.

⁴² "7 Protests, 7 Agreements: A Timeline Of TLP Protests."

state. This event was covered significantly at X using the hashtag #KhadimHussainRizvi. The hashtag continued to trend on Twitter for more than 14 hours. The hashtag was also the top-ranked Twitter hashtag based on the trending time for the whole day on December 2, 2018.

Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Walks Out of Jail: On May 16, 2019, Khadim Hussain Rizvi was released a day after Lahore High Court granted the bail to the TLP Chief. His release also coinciding with significant twitter activity with the trending hashtag #WelcomeBackKhadimRizvi. The total tweet volume it amassed was 88,559 and it ranked 3rd among the top 5 on the basis of tweet volume. It was also the 3rd highest among the longest trending with a trending time of 11.5 hours of the day.

TLP Demands Expulsion of French Ambassador: In November 2020, protests and demonstrations erupted in Pakistan against France after a French magazine, Charlie Hebdo, announced to publish some controversial cartoons.⁴³ These protests were mainly led by TLP, which till now had gained considerable influence in the domestic political landscape of the country. The protestors, led by Khadim Rizvi, demanded the expulsion of the French Ambassador and a boycott of French goods. During this time, several hashtags were used to promote TLP's narrative across the country. For example, the trend #WorsthellingOnTLPMarch became the second longest-running trend on 16th November 2020, with a total tweet volume of 86,931 tweets. Similarly, another trend of #Harummati_ParFarz_TahafuzNamoos_Risalat, roughly translated as protection of Prophet's honour is a duty of every follower, amassed a total tweets volume of 64,140. It also became the 6th top trend in the country in terms of volume. The protests were called off by TLP after an agreement was reached with government agreeing to take the matter of the expulsion to parliament and reducing the country's diplomatic engagements with France.⁴⁴

Khadim Rizvi Dies: Just days after the protests to expel the French ambassador, Khadim Hussain Rizvi passed away on November 19, 2020.⁴⁵ Once again, Twitter trends remained active as people gathered to perform the TLP leader's last rites. The hashtag #KhadimHussainRizvi remained trending for two days, i.e. 20th and 21st November 2020. A cumulative total of 78,000 tweet volume was reached while trending time was 9.5 and 8.5 hours on November 20 and 21, respectively. Both trending times were ranked in the top 5 for days.

⁴³ Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Anti-France Protests Called Off After 'Deal' with Gov't," *Al Jazeera*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Adnan Lodhi, "TLP Chief Khadim Hussain Rizvi Passes Away," *Express Tribune*, November 19, 2020.

TLP Demands Release of Saad Rizvi: In October 2021, TLP once again clashed with the state resulting in the death of four police personnel.⁴⁶ The protests erupted as TLP demanded release of its imprisoned leader, who was taken into custody on the charges of inciting violence against state to expel French ambassador. The 10 day protest ended with yet another agreement with the state authorities. TLP protests also coincided with the Islamic date of 12th Rabiul Awal, which is celebrated as the birthday of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), mainly by the Barelvi population of Pakistan. In 2020, this day was celebrated on 20th October, and trends of X (formerly Twitter) were mostly related to the celebration of the birthday; however, one certain trend, #JangonwalayNabikiAmad [transliteration], roughly translates to the coming of the Prophet of war, was most likely carried by TLP as it carried confrontationist connotations. The tweet had a total volume of 238,029 tweets, and it became not only the 3rd most tweeted trend of the day but also the 4th longest-running trend with a trending time of 15 hours. Several more trends followed on the proceeding days from October 21 to October 24, with different hashtags gaining greater coverage. The hashtag #KalTakMuhaidaPooraKaro [transliteration], roughly translated to Fulfill the Agreement by Tomorrow, amassed a total tweet volume of more than 500,000 over two days, ranking at 2nd and 3rd. Another hashtag #LabbaikNameos_E_RisalatMarch, amassed more than a total of 1.5 million tweets volume over three separate days. These trends were also ranked at the top on both given days. With violence ensuing during the protests, TLP was also using the hashtag #PtiTerroristStopKillingTLP, which amassed a total of 917,921 tweets volume over two days, being ranked 2nd on both days.

First Death Anniversary of Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi: With the death of its founding leader, Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, many thought the party would also lose its street support and die a natural death. However, his son, Hafiz Saad Hussain Rizvi, continued to amass greater support from his followers, with many others joining their ranks due to their increased strength against state institutions. Their social media campaigns continued to show greater penetration with the hashtag #Urs_Ameer-ul-Mujahideen (transliteration) on the death anniversary of Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi. The hashtag amassed a total tweet volume of 125,940 on November 19, 2021 being ranked on the 5th spot. The word Ameer-ul-Mujahideen remains significant in this hashtag, which roughly translates to leader of the Mujahideen, connoting to the spirit of Jihad and armed struggle against disbelievers.

Lynching of Sri Lankan National Priyantha Kumara: Pakistan was once again in the global headlines for the lynching of Sri Lankan citizen,

⁴⁶ "Four Pakistani police killed in violence at far-right TLP protest," *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/>

Priyantha Kumara, in the city of Sialkot. On December 3, 2021, a mob lynched Priyantha, a local factory manager, over the allegations of Blasphemy.⁴⁷ During the act, the mob was chanting the party slogans of TLP. TLP leadership denied their involvement in the act and even condemned the lynching.⁴⁸ Despite TLP leadership's denial of being involved in the event, the chanting of TLP's slogans by the violent mob signifies the entrenchment of its extremist narrative in society. For three days after the lynching, hashtags related to the Sialkot incident were trending on X. However, on the fourth day, despite denouncing the act, the TLP activists and supporters began the hashtag #Shuhuda-e-Namoos-e-RisalatConference (transliteration), roughly translating to Martyrs for Prophet's Honor Conference. Although the language of the trend itself did not directly relate to the Sialkot incident, the timing of this trend points towards tacit support. The hashtag amassed a tweet volume of 57,974 and was the sixth top trend for the day.

TLP Celebrates Independence Day at Faizabad: On August 14, 2022, TLP leader Hafiz Saad Hussain Rizvi announced to hold a rally "Nazriya-i-Pakistan" starting from Liaquat Bagh to Faizabad.⁴⁹ TLP leader Hafiz Saad Hussain Rizvi stated that the rally was being held to defend the 'two-nation theory', on which Pakistan was found. He also commended the armed forces and reiterated their support for defending the motherland. On the day, TLP was again trending on Twitter with the hashtag #Labbaik_Faizabad, which amassed a tweet volume of 755,657, being ranked the number one in terms of volume. Although the hashtag does not promote or signify any extremist narrative, the volume of the tweets for their celebratory rally highlights the deep roots the party has been able to cultivate through social media campaigning and narrative promotion.

In 2022, X suspended accounts of TLP leadership for censorship of content that violates the community guidelines. However, the TLP continued its on-ground activities with more protests and clashes with the government, the recent being a sit-in at Faizabad in July 2024 to demand greater action to support Gaza. Despite bans and suspension on social media, especially X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, the ability of the group to stage week-long sit-ins showcases the outreach of TLP to the masses. It is also important to note that this study has only analyzed the official channels of TLP on YouTube, therefore, the actual extent of TLP's audience reach must be much higher if TLP's fan pages are also

⁴⁷ Imran Sadiq, "Sialkot mob lynches Sri Lankan factory manager, burns corpse over blasphemy allegations," *Dawn*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1661728>

⁴⁸ Usama Nizamani, "The TLP, Social Media, and Recurring Cycles of Violence," *South Asian Voices*, February 17, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/>

⁴⁹ Aamir Yasin, "TLP celebrates Independence Day at Faizabad," *Dawn*, August 14, 2022.

incorporated in the data. Similarly, the inaccessibility of archival data related to the comprehensive activity of TLP on X (formerly twitter) has also limited the analysis to the ranks, trending duration and tweet volume. However, if retweets and private shares are also taken into account, the actual outreach of TLP's activity on X must have been much higher at the time. Ultimately, this translates into the amplification of the narratives and messages of TLP to a wider audience. *Table 2* presents different hashtags based on their tweet volume and trending time along with their ranks.

Table 2: Hashtags Tweet Volume and Ranking for the Day.

Hashtag	Tweets Volume	Rank	Date	Event Coinciding
#KhadimHussainRizvi	19136	1 st	December 2, 2018	Khadim Hussain Rizvi Booked for Treason
#WelcomeBackKhadimRizvi	88559	3 rd	May 16, 2019	Khadim Rizvi Released from Prison
#WorstHellingOnTLPMarch	86931	2 nd	November 16, 2020	Protests against France
##Harummati_ParFarz_Taha fuzNamoos_Risalat	64,140	6 th	November 17, 2020	Protests against France
#KhadinHussainRizvi	78,000+		November 20 & 21, 2020	Death of Khadim Rizvi
#JangonwalayNabikiAmad	238029	3 rd	October 20, 2021	Birthday of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) while TLP was Agitating on the Roads for Release of its Leader
#KalTakMuhaidaPooraKaro	586,889	2 nd and 3 rd	October 21 & 22, 2021	Protests to Fulfill Demands over France

#LabbaikNam oos_E_Risalat March	1.7 million	1 st , 1 st and 3 rd	October 22-24, 2021	Protests over Demands to Release Saad Rizvi
#PtiTerroristS topKillingTLP	917,921	2 nd	October 22-23, 2021	Governme nt Clamps down on TLP Protestors Demandin g Release of Saad Rizvi
#Urs_Ameer- ul-Mujahideen	125,940	5 th	November 19, 2021	Death Anniversar y of Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi
#Shuhuda-e- Namoos-e- RisalatConfere nce	57,974	32 nd	December 6, 2021	3 days after lynching of Priyantha Kumara
#Labbaik_Faiz abad	755,657	1 st	August 14, 2022	TLP Celebrates Independe nce Day

Source: Data compiled by the authors.

Regulation of Social Media Platforms in Pakistan

The internet has revolutionized access to information; however, it has also created the possibility of extremist content and campaigns being weaponised by extremist groups on an unprecedented scale. Social media platforms offer one of the most efficient and free tools for the promotion of extremist content that could even lead to ethnic cleansing. For instance, In August 2017, Rohingya Muslims- a minority ethno-religious group in Myanmar- was subjected to a systematic military campaign involving mass killings, arson and rapes.⁵⁰ As a result of this, around a million Rohingya were forced to live in exile in the neighboring countries.⁵¹ In 2018, a UN fact finding mission revealed that Facebook was one of the primary and “useful instrument” for systemically running a hate campaign against the

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Documentation of Atrocities in Northern Rakhine State*, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/>

⁵¹ UN Refugee Agency, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained," UNHCR, last modified March 18, 2019, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/>

Rohingya and for creating the conditions for ethnic cleansing of the group in the country.⁵² In subsequent months, Meta (Facebook's parent company) released a human rights impact report in which the company admitted that it had not done enough to stop the hate campaign against the Rohingya on its platform.⁵³ In 2022, Amnesty International further revealed that anti-Rohingya content was "proactively amplified" by Facebook's algorithms.⁵⁴ Moreover, it was also claimed by Amnesty International that for social media companies the lives and issues of users from the Global South are comparatively given less attention and priority.⁵⁵ This implies that not only the engagement based algorithms of social media platforms tend to amplify hateful and graphic content, but implementation of content moderation policies and community guidelines are also comparatively weaker for underdeveloped countries. Therefore, it could be concluded that one of the main reasons that extremist content online goes largely unchecked in countries like Pakistan is the policies of social media platforms.

Another important aspect related to moderation of content on social media platforms is the issue of non-English languages. For example, after the breakout of hate speech against the Rohingya Muslims Myanmar that led to a large-scale violence, Facebook hired 100 Burmese speaking content moderators. The job of these moderators was to develop a dataset providing local context for detection of hateful content. This dataset was later used by Facebook to train its algorithms to detect harmful content on its platform.⁵⁶ However, it is also important to note that there are thousands of local languages and dialects that are used around the world. Moreover, with a rapid exchange of information, trends of popular culture constantly evolve, which also impacts the trends of language and communication. Therefore, creating databases and automated systems that can understand evolving communication trends, local contexts and different dialects. However, with the successful integration of Large Language Models (LLMs) with the internet, natural language processing (NLP) has become relatively easier.⁵⁷ Therefore, social media platforms

⁵² United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/64, September 12, 2018, p. 14, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/>

⁵³ Facebook, "Human Rights Impact Assessment: Myanmar," November 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/11/myanmar-hria/>.

⁵⁴ Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Facebook's Systems Promoted Violence Against Rohingya; Meta Owes Reparations – New Report," September 6, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Facebook, "Human Rights Impact Assessment: Myanmar."

⁵⁷ TELUS Digital, "The Evolution of Natural Language Processing," last modified March 3, 2022, <https://www.telusdigital.com/insights/ai-data/article/natural-language-processing-evolution>.

must strike a delicate balance to keep hateful and extremist content in check, while ensuring freedom of speech of their users.

In Pakistan, content on social media platforms is primarily regulated through blocking or censorship. In 2010, Pakistan blocked Facebook over a blasphemous campaign on the platform. In 2012, YouTube was banned by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) over objectionable content. The ban remained in place for 4 years until it was finally lifted in 2016.⁵⁸ A similar ban was placed on Wikipedia for two days in 2023. In February 2024, the Pakistan government blocked access to X (formerly Twitter), citing national security concerns. The ban came around the time of the 2024 elections, and the platform remains inaccessible to date.⁵⁹ Censorship of content in Pakistan is primarily carried out by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)

Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) empowers PTA to block and remove online content if it infringes on the "interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or a part thereof, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court or commission of or incitement to an offence under this Act."⁶⁰ However, it is important to observe that as Waldman and Verga (2016) point out, blanket censorship or suspension of extremist content could be a short-term fix, however, these strategies are inadequate in offering long-term solutions.⁶¹ The sheer amount of content that needs to be sifted through for detection and suspension of extremist content makes it a difficult task for any government organization. Moreover, social media accounts are moving targets as deactivating and setting up a new account is fairly simple. Similarly, blanket censorships or suspensions are not effective against encrypted social media services and 'dark net' platforms.⁶² Therefore, instead of blanket censorship or suspension of accounts/platforms, an effective strategy would be to engage the management of social media platforms to provide context for the training of their algorithms that detect hateful and extremist content. Moreover, local community leaders could also be engaged to come up with effective counter-extremist narratives.

⁵⁸ Usama Khilji, "Did the PTA Illegally Block YouTube During Imran Khan's Speech?," DAWN.COM, last modified September 12, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1707706>.

⁵⁹ Muhammad Ahmad, "Govt Stands Firm on X Clampdown, Citing National Security Concerns," *Express Tribune*, October 30, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2477815/govt-stands-firm-on-x-clampdown-citing-national-security-concerns>.

⁶⁰ Government of Pakistan, *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016*, <http://nasirlawsite.com/laws/peca1.htm>.

⁶¹ Waldman and Verga, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 6-7.

⁶² Ibid.

Conclusion

Social media platforms offer a simple and free tool for the propagation and amplification of extremist narratives. The unabated flow of polarizing, radical and extremist content on these platforms continues to pose a significant challenge for states and social media regulators alike. Deliberated and coordinated dissemination of extremist content online has consequences in the real world. Social media platforms are often employed by the extremist groups to coordinate and carry out mass protests and support vigilantism. Pakistan continues to face these challenges with regard to TLP.

In order to deal with the challenge of regulating extremist content online, Pakistan has for long used the traditional methods of bans and censorship. However, these strategies have failed to limit the influence and reach of extremist content. To effectively counter the propagation of extremist content, close collaboration with social media platforms is needed. Content moderation algorithms of different social media platforms are not always trained in the local languages and context. Therefore, there is a need to identify the target areas of the extremist narratives and then train the regulation algorithms according to the local languages and contexts. A contextual moderation algorithm would prove significant in countering various contextual content which otherwise would pass through universal regulatory mechanisms. Moreover, community based counter-extremist narratives are also required that cater to the realities and needs of each community rather than adoption of an overarching counter-extremist narrative for the whole nation.

