

THE CONNECTIVE LOGIC OF SATIRE AND THE REIMAGINATION OF DIGITAL ASSEMBLY IN PAKISTAN

By

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Vienna, 16 June 2025

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of humor and satire as tools of connective action that enable alternative forms of expression, assembly and the mobilization of counter-narratives within Pakistan's restrictive digital environment. While political humor has been extensively studied in democratic contexts, limited attention has been given to its role in enabling assembly under authoritarian regimes, particularly in South Asia. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with Pakistani content creators who use humor for political critique, alongside legal analysis of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and comparative insights from other authoritarian contexts. Grounded in classical humor theory and the connective action framework, the research examines how satirical content enables individuals to circumvent censorship, build community, and mobilize political resistance beyond formal organizational structures. The findings reveal that humor performs multiple strategic functions: it captures attention in oversaturated media environments, fosters collective identity through emotional resonance, offers plausible deniability for dissent, and enables personalized modes of participation. However, humor remains vulnerable to co-optation and legal suppression by state actors. This thesis argues that social media platforms have become vital arenas for exercising a digital form of freedom of assembly, particularly when physical gatherings are curtailed. The study contributes to the scholarship on digital activism by illuminating the mechanisms through which humor facilitates political engagement in repressive settings and offers practical insights into the role of creative expression in sustaining civic participation through what I term 'The Connective Logic of Satire'. It concludes with a practical intervention: an educational website and AI-powered guide for content creators that translates academic insights into actionable resources, supporting digital resilience, strategic expression, and democratic engagement in Pakistan.

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Introduction

In an era of expanding digital connectivity and shrinking civic space, citizens navigate complex pathways to exercise fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly. This thesis explores how humor and satire in digital spaces facilitate alternative forms of freedom of expression, assembly, and mobilization of counter-narratives in Pakistan—a country marked by growing restrictions on freedom of expression and conventional forms of political participation. These freedoms are increasingly curtailed through the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 (detailed in Section 1.3), and more recently, through the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act 2024, which grants authorities broad powers to restrict or ban assemblies.² At the same time, the proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms has transformed the landscape of political dissent, enabling new forms of civic engagement that bypass traditional gatekeepers and circumvent direct censorship.

Within this evolving digital ecosystem, humor and satire have emerged as potent tools for political critique, community building, and mobilization. In authoritarian contexts, they offer subtle yet powerful means of resistance—allowing individuals to assert agency, contest dominant narratives, and challenge political manipulation.³ By embedding critique in ambiguity and drawing on cultural references that resonate with diverse audiences, satirical content creates spaces for political assembly that might otherwise be suppressed in Pakistan’s restrictive environment. This research investigates how such content broadens the scope of digital assembly, enabling citizens to engage with political discourse, articulate dissent, and participate in resistance through personalized, creative expression.

² Amnesty International, ‘Human Rights in Pakistan’ (Amnesty International, 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/pakistan/report-pakistan/> accessed 7 May 2025.

³ U Korkut, A McGarry, I Erhart, H Eslen-Ziya and O Jenzen, ‘Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism’ (2022) *Int Political Sci Rev* <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120971151>.

This research addresses three key gaps in the literature at the intersection of humor, digital expression, and civic resistance. First, existing scholarship on political humor predominantly centers on democratic contexts within the Global North, often neglecting how digital satire functions under authoritarian regimes in the Global South⁴—particularly in South Asia. Second, humor studies frequently lack attention to socio-cultural specificity, highlighting the need for more historically and culturally grounded analyses.⁵ Third, while humor and satire on social media are widely discussed, their potential as tools for connective action and mobilizing public opinion remains underexplored.⁶

To address these gaps, the thesis employs a qualitative case study approach, using semi-structured interviews with content creators who use satire for political expression. The analysis is situated within a theoretical framework that combines classical humor theories with Bennett and Segerberg’s connective action paradigm.⁷ This integrated approach offers a lens to examine how humorous digital content facilitates forms of political assembly and expression beyond formal organizational structures.

Chapter 1 situates the study within existing literature on political humor, digital activism, and Pakistan’s socio-political landscape, while also introducing the theoretical framework to guide the research. Chapter 2 outlines the legal context, building the case for freedom of expression and assembly in Pakistan. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and presents findings on how satirical content facilitates counter-narratives and creates spaces for digital assembly. It also explores the challenges faced by content creators and considers the broader implications for

⁴ D Hoefel, J P Capelotti and R Date, ‘Humor and Conflict in the Global South’ (2024) 12(3) *European Journal of Humour Research* 1.

⁵ R Y S Priana, S Karlinah, D R Hidayat and D W Sjuchro, ‘Humor as a Representation of Community Identity: An Analysis of Sundanese Verbal Humor’ (2024) 12(4) *European Journal of Humour Research* 197.

⁶ Umut Korkut and others, ‘Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism’ (2022) 43 *International Political Science Review* 629.

⁷ WL Bennett and A Segerberg, ‘The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics’ (2012) 15(5) *Information, Communication & Society* 739
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>.

understanding satire’s role in digital contexts. Chapter 4 offers a discussion on key findings and their significance for understanding digital assembly in Pakistan and reflects on how the research insights directly informed the capstone project—an interactive educational website with a predictive AI agent designed to support content creators in Pakistan—followed by the conclusion.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1. Satire and Humor in Global Discourse

The ubiquity of digital media has transformed the landscape of political dissent and civic engagement globally. One such avenue is the use of humor and satire to challenge dominant narratives and mobilize counter-movements. Humor is a pervasive element of human communication in which stimulus produces amusement—a fundamental ingredient of life that serves a broad range of purposes, spanning from mere entertainment to satire i.e. using humorous techniques to convey social or political criticism.⁸ Satire is a literary and rhetorical form that employs humor, irony, exaggeration, and ridicule to critique human vices, follies, or institutions, with the intent of provoking reform or societal reflection.⁹ Throughout this paper, humor will be used as a broad term, while satire will specifically refer to the use of wit to critique power structures and expose societal flaws.

Satire has been used throughout history to raise awareness of critical issues. Although its use was once limited to professional satirists and media, it has evolved to become a genre of the masses.¹⁰ This has changed the universe of opinion leaders from what was once a small group to one that is now much larger.¹¹ Satire is seen as a power for democracy and satirists as credible sources serving as opinion leaders for their audiences.¹² Satirists are said to explain politics in

⁸ A Godioli and J Young, 'Factsheet on Humor and Satire Case Law' (Columbia Global Freedom of Expression, 2024) <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/publications/factsheet-on-humor-and-satirecase-law/>.

⁹ 'Satire | Definition & Examples | Britannica' <https://www.britannica.com/art/satire> accessed 9 June 2025.

¹⁰ V L Crittenden, L M Hopkins and J M Simmons, 'Satirists as Opinion Leaders: Is Social Media Redefining Roles?' (2011) *Journal of Public Affairs* <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.400>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² V L Crittenden, L M Hopkins and J M Simmons, 'Satirists as Opinion Leaders: Is Social Media Redefining Roles?' (2011) *Journal of Public Affairs* 11(3) 174–180, cited in D Lichtenstein, C Nitsch and A JM Wagner, 'Jokers or Journalists? A Study of Satirists' Motivations, Role Orientations, and Understanding of Satire' (2021) *22 Journalism Studies* 1756.

a relatable way and provide moral orientation in the context of contemporary global political disorder or to perform the role of antagonists concerning distrusted political elites.¹³

Humor plays several roles, including displays of ‘courage in adversity’ and as a coping mechanism.¹⁴ The way an issue is presented can significantly impact how it is understood and interpreted. Given its role in challenging censorship and packaging scrutiny of serious and controversial topics within a ‘humorous discourse’¹⁵ satire, as a distinct form of expression, requires robust legal protection to prevent undue restrictions.

Humor and satire have long been employed as powerful tools of political resistance, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. The inherent ability of humor to engage diverse audiences has made it a compelling medium for political expression.¹⁶ The digital sphere, particularly social media platforms, has amplified the reach and impact of such content, enabling the rapid circulation of counter-narratives and the mobilization of collective action.¹⁷

Much of the literature on satire focuses on its utility in mobilizing opinions, circumventing censorship, and exploring the experiences of satirists. However, this discourse is largely centered on the Global North.¹⁸ It is important to note that the nature of satire and humor shifts depending on the political context, moving from being individual-centric in democratic regimes to system-centered in authoritarian ones. For example, satire in the U.S. often targets figures

¹³ Dennis Lichtenstein, Cordula Nitsch and Anna JM Wagner, ‘Jokers or Journalists? A Study of Satirists’ Motivations, Role Orientations, and Understanding of Satire’ (2021) 22 *Journalism Studies* 1756.

¹⁴ L G Reed, “‘Taking jokes seriously’: Establishing a normative place for satire within the freedom of expression analysis of the European Court of Human Rights’ (2022) 11(1) *Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 64–97 <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2052-1871.1355>.

¹⁵ P Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a stylistic model of satirical humour* (John Benjamins Publishing Company 2003) 1 <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.2>.

¹⁶ J L Davis, T P Love and G Killen, ‘Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humor on Social Media’ (2018) *New Media & Society* <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818762602>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ D Hoefel, JP Capelotti and R Date, ‘Humor and Conflict in the Global South’ (2024) 12(3) *The European Journal of Humour Research* 1 <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.12.3.1001>

like Trump, whereas, in countries like Pakistan, Argentina, and Chile, the focus shifts toward critiquing governmental structures and the systems that enable leaders' rise to power.¹⁹

As authoritarian regimes have gained more control of the mainstream media, activism using digital technologies has also seen growth.²⁰ Through social media, messages contrary to those that are sanctioned by the authority spread very quickly, for example, messages on military interference in election fraud, economic domination, and oppression of the opposition,²¹ thus becoming popular counter-narratives.

1.2. Assembly and Mobilization Through Satire in Digital Spaces

In authoritarian contexts, satire becomes a subtle but powerful form of resistance. By exaggerating the absurdity of state propaganda or exposing contradictions in official narratives, satire enables citizens to undermine fear and reclaim a sense of agency. Through irony, parody, and exaggeration, communities can articulate dissent, reflect on social norms, and negotiate their positions within contested political spaces without confrontation. Digital platforms function both as stages for humor and tools for mobilization—amplifying dissenting voices, disseminating information about protest activities, and facilitating coordination among organizers and participants.²² In this way, humor intersects with activism, turning passive spectators into engaged participants.

¹⁹ 'Satire in the US Has a Trump Problem' (TPM — Talking Points Memo, 26 December 2019) <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/satire-in-the-us-has-a-trump-problem-less-democratic-countries-have-some-solutions> accessed 16 March 2025.

²⁰ Z S Ahmed and others, 'Contestations of Internet Governance and Digital Authoritarianism in Pakistan' [2024] International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s10767-024-09493-2> accessed 3 February 2025.

²¹ M Kalsoom, A Shahid, M Zaman, F Aslam, G-i-Hina and M A Khan, 'Competing Narratives, Contested Power: Examining Military-Civilian Relations in Pakistan through CDA' (2024) 12(1) Kurdish Studies 5159 <https://doi.org/10.53555/ks.v12i1.3432>.

²² Digital Rights Foundation Pakistan, 'Submission to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on New Technologies and Their Impact on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Assemblies, Including Peaceful Protests' (15 October 2019) https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNHCHR-Report-on-new-tech-and-FoA_-Submission-1.pdf accessed 16 March 2025.

Digital spaces thus not only enable effective resistance but also reconfigure traditional notions of political assembly. In contexts where physical protest may be curtailed, online platforms facilitate forms of collective presence that resemble a digital assembly. A growing body of empirical research on digital humor identifies several mechanisms by which humorous content fosters mobilization.²³ Humor acts as an attention-grabbing device in saturated media environments and receives higher engagement compared to non-humorous messaging.²⁴ Moreover, humor plays a vital role in forging collective identity through shared cultural references and emotional resonance, further enhancing its political utility.²⁵

However, the relationship between humorous content and mobilization is not uniformly positive across contexts and humor types. Comparative studies examining different humor styles have found that self-deprecating and absurdist humor tend to build solidarity without necessarily promoting action, while satirical humor directly targeting opponents or systems is more strongly associated with mobilization outcomes.²⁶ Research specifically on political satire in Hong Kong suggests that humor serves as a ‘medium of value’ that connects supporters with similar political values.²⁷ In Azerbaijan, humor functions as a tool for fostering a culture of dissent and building solidarity in digital spaces, particularly given the restricted offline civic space and state control over mainstream media.²⁸ By cloaking political critique in ambiguity and playfulness, humorous content offers what scholars have termed plausible deniability²⁹ for both creators and disseminators—enabling political expression while mitigating personal risk.

²³ K Pearce and A Hajizada, ‘No Laughing Matter: Humor as a Means of Dissent in the Digital Era: The Case of Authoritarian Azerbaijan’ (2014) 22 *Demokratizatsiya* 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ A S A Assagaf, ‘Legal Analysis of Freedom of Expression and Online Humour in Indonesia’ (2023) 11(3) *The European Journal of Humour Research* 105 <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2023.11.3.807>.

²⁶ M Boukes, H Boomgaarden, M Moorman and C de Vreese, ‘At Odds: Laughing and Thinking? The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire’ (2015) 65 *Journal of Communication* 721 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12173>.

²⁷ Y Kwong, ‘Political Satire and Collective Reproduction: The Power of Political Nicknames in Hong Kong’ (2024) 12(2) *Signs and Society* 215 <https://doi.org/10.1086/729473>.

²⁸ Pearce and Hajizada (n 21).

²⁹ Pearce and Hajizada (n 21).

Similarly, in Pakistan, humor and satire play a vital role in circumventing censorship, reducing personal risk, challenging dominant narratives, and mobilizing alternative discourses. As further explored in Section 1.3 and Section 3, these practices exemplify what Bennett and Segerberg describe as connective action³⁰—a digitally enabled form of participation in which individuals personalize and circulate content as a means of political engagement. These dynamics move beyond the notion of audiences as passive recipients and instead position them as active reproducers—agents who generate new meanings and contribute to the broader circulation of counter-narratives.

1.3. Humor Theory and The Logic of Connective Action

Understanding how humor functions in digital spaces requires examining the theoretical foundations that explain its social and political dimensions. Humor theory has traditionally been divided into three major frameworks: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory, each providing distinct insights into how humor may catalyze collective action.³¹ These theories highlight humor's communicative power to both unite (through identification and clarification) and divide (through enforcement and differentiation).³²

Superiority theory suggests that humor emerges from a sense of triumph over others or over previously threatening situations.³³ This is particularly relevant in political contexts where marginalized groups use satire to symbolically subvert power relations,³⁴ creating moments of perceived victory that can strengthen group solidarity. Relief theory conceptualizes humor as a release of psychological tension, which explains how politically charged jokes in digital spaces

³⁰ W Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, 'THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVE ACTION: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics' (2012) 15 *Information, Communication & Society* 739.

³¹ J Meyer, 'Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication' (2000) *Communication Theory* <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x>.

³² Ibid.

³³ T Kulka, 'The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humor' (2007) 14(3) *Organon F.* 320-333.

³⁴ L Richter, 'Laughing about Religious Authority—But Not Too Loud' (2021) 12(2) *Religions* 73 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020073>.

can provide emotional catharsis for communities experiencing repression or frustration.³⁵

Incongruity theory focuses on the cognitive aspects of humor arising from unexpected juxtapositions, which helps explain how memes and other digital humor forms create shared meaning through the playful subversion of established narratives.³⁶

Building upon these classical approaches, contemporary scholars have developed more specialized frameworks for understanding digital humor in collective and connective action contexts. The traditional collective action model, long dominant in social movement theory, emphasizes formal organizations, collective identity frames, and resource mobilization as prerequisites for effective political action.³⁷ In contrast, ‘the logic of connective action’ offers a more nuanced lens for understanding digitally networked movements that operate through personalized, technologically enabled coordination.³⁸ This framework is particularly useful for analyzing Pakistan's digital landscape, where traditional activism often faces severe constraints.

Connective action operates without centralized organization, relying instead on personalized content sharing across media networks. Here, digital platforms function as organizing structures themselves. This is especially significant in Pakistan, where direct political organizing faces legal and social constraints, yet personalized forms of digital dissent—such as satirical content—thrive. As Bennett and Segerberg argue, ‘easy-to-personalize action themes’ encourage wider participation by allowing individuals to spread political messages through their networks.³⁹ In such a restrictive environment, humor and satire serve as strategic vehicles for political expression, enabling dissent while maintaining plausible deniability.

³⁵ Kulka, ‘The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories’. (n 31).

³⁶ Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (eds), *Studies in Political Humour: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment*, vol 46 (John Benjamins Publishing Company 2011) <<http://www.jbe-platform.com/content/books/9789027282217>> accessed 17 March 2025.

³⁷ Bennett and Segerberg (n 30).

³⁸ Bennett and Segerberg (n 30).

³⁹ Bennett and Segerberg (n 30).

2. Legal Framework Surrounding Humor, Satire, Expression, and Assembly

2.1. International Norms and Interplay of Rights and Politics

The rights to freedom of expression (FOE) and freedom of assembly (FOA) are fundamental liberties guaranteed by both international and national legal systems. These rights empower individuals and groups to engage in peaceful protest and public discourse, subject to reasonable and proportionate restrictions that must be narrowly defined. The right to assembly is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under Article 20 and Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). To fully realize this right, the rights to free expression and privacy serve as enabling protections.⁴⁰

However, the relationship between freedom of expression, including satire and humor, and the political landscape is complex and contingent upon various factors inherent in each nation. Sullivan and Transue assert that such freedoms are significantly influenced by the political climate and psychological factors within a country.⁴¹ This complexity is echoed in comparative legal scholarship: for example, Assagaf's analysis of Indonesia demonstrates that the effectiveness of legal protections for expression is often curtailed by political and societal restraints.⁴² Humor as a form of expression presents unique challenges, as its interpretation is highly subjective and can lead to divergent regulatory approaches.⁴³

In the absence of established tests or soft-law instruments specifically focusing on satire and humor, humor is typically evaluated considering general free speech provisions existing at the domestic level. International standards such as Article 19 of the UDHR, Article 10 of the

⁴⁰ Digital Rights Foundation Pakistan, Submission to UNHCHR (n 20) 2.

⁴¹ JL Sullivan and JE Transue, 'The Psychological Underpinnings of Democracy: A Selective Review of Research on Political Tolerance, Interpersonal Trust, and Social Capital' (1999) 50 Annual Review of Psychology 625, as noted in Assagaf (n 23).

⁴² Andryka Syayed Achmad Assagaf, 'Legal Analysis of Freedom of Expression and Online Humour in Indonesia' (2023) 11 The European Journal of Humour Research 105.

⁴³ Assagaf (n 42).

European Convention on Human Rights, Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights, and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provide guiding principles. Notably, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has consistently held that freedom of expression—including humor and satire—applies 'not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favorably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population'.⁴⁴ This position is echoed in judgments like *Kimel v. Argentina* from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which underscore satire's role as a tool for dissent and social critique.⁴⁵

2.2. Domestic Legal Landscape in Pakistan

Pakistan, a signatory to the ICCPR since 2010, has constitutional provisions that align with its international human rights obligations. Article 19 of the Constitution provides for freedom of speech, Article 14 ensures dignity and privacy, and Article 16⁴⁶ guarantees the right to assembly. These rights, though robust on paper, often encounter substantial barriers in interpretation and implementation. The rights to free expression and privacy are deeply interconnected and serve as crucial enablers for the right to peaceful assembly⁴⁷—particularly in digital spaces which have become vital arenas for activism and dissent. Digital rights concerns such as data privacy, monitoring, and censorship are often discussed together within the context of digital rights. In recent years, Pakistan has witnessed the emergence of digital authoritarianism as a governing

⁴⁴ A Godioli and J Young, Factsheet on Humor and Satire Case Law (Columbia Global Freedom of Expression 2024) <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/publications/factsheet-on-humor-and-satirecase-law/> accessed 23 April 2025.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The Constitution of Pakistan 1973 guarantees the right to assembly under Article 16:

'Every citizen shall have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order.' As found in Human Rights in Pakistan' (n 1). 'Human Rights in Pakistan' (n 2).

⁴⁷ 'Association and Assembly in the Digital Age' (ICNL)

<<https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/association-and-assembly-in-the-digital-age-2>> accessed 16 June 2025.

strategy.⁴⁸ This involves increased surveillance of citizens, journalists, politicians, and human rights activists—activities that are seen as an infringement on the right to privacy.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, these measures appear to be utilized by the state to suppress dissent.

2.3. Legal and Political Barriers to Freedom of Assembly in Pakistan

While Article 16 guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, the enactment of laws such as the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act 2024 has narrowed its application. Passed without public consultation, this law grants broad powers to restrict or ban assemblies especially in Islamabad, with a similar law enacted in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir.⁵⁰ Authorities also routinely invoke Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code to impose blanket bans on gatherings.⁵¹ As per the 2024 country report by Amnesty International, 44 government employees were suspended in Baluchistan for participating in a sit-in; the International Women's Day March was blocked with barbed wire in Islamabad; dozens of farmers were arrested in Lahore; and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supporters faced mass detentions and repeated denial of protest permissions.⁵² These developments reveal an increasingly hostile environment for public assembly, where legal and extralegal tactics are used to curtail dissent.

2.4. PECA and the Shrinking Digital Space

Legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA)⁵³—which is the main law to tackle cybercrimes in Pakistan—exemplifies this contradiction, as its provisions are often

⁴⁸ I Yilmaz, Z S Ahmed and S Akbarzadeh, 'Digital Authoritarianism and Activism for Digital Rights in Pakistan' (European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 20 July 2023) <https://www.populismstudies.org/digital-authoritarianism-and-activism-for-digital-rights-in-pakistan/> accessed 7 May 2025.

⁴⁹ Fibgar, 'Surveillance of Critical Voices: An Urgent Challenge for Human Rights' (FIBGAR, 28 January 2025) <<https://fibgar.es/en/surveillance-of-critical-voices-an-urgent-challenge-for-human-rights/>> accessed 19 May 2025.

⁵⁰ 'Human Rights in Pakistan' (n 2).

⁵¹ 'Human Rights in Pakistan' (n 2).

⁵² 'Human Rights in Pakistan' (n 2).

⁵³ Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (Pakistan) <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqaJw1-apaUY2Fqa-apaUY2Jvbp8%253D-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj> accessed 15 May 2025.

used to curtail online freedoms. For instance, section 20 of PECA, originally intended to protect against harm to dignity, has been expansively interpreted to silence criticism of state institutions, including the military and judiciary.⁵⁴

Although Section 20 was originally limited to speech concerning ‘natural persons,’ in 2022, the government enacted an Ordinance that significantly expanded its scope. This Ordinance redefined the term ‘person’ to include ‘any company, association or body of persons whether incorporated or not, institution, organization, authority or any other body established by the Government under any law or otherwise.’⁵⁵ It also removed the word ‘natural,’ thus allowing for the prosecution of online defamation by these actors against state authorities.⁵⁶ Such legislative manipulation fosters an environment in which criticism of state authorities is framed as a threat to national security or public order, thereby suppressing dissent.

Moreover, section 37 of the Act allows for blocking or removal of ‘unlawful’ online content which includes if the content is against the ‘glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan’ or ‘public order, decency or morality’. Section 37 also grants the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) sweeping powers to block or remove online content without judicial oversight⁵⁷. The PTA unilaterally interprets what qualifies as unlawful, immoral, or anti-state; this effectively gives both the legislative and judicial authority to a single executive body.⁵⁸ Such unchecked power undermines constitutional safeguards and restricts free expression through unchecked, politically motivated censorship.

⁵⁴ S Khan and P M Tehrani, ‘Examination of Restriction of Free Speech under International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in Reference to Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, Pakistan’ (2019) 8 International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering 939, DOI:10.35940/ijrte.B1084.0982S919.

⁵⁵ Section 20 of Pakistan’s Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act: Urgent Reforms Needed (Trial Watch Fairness Report, Clooney Foundation for Justice, September 2023) https://cfj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Pakistan_PECA-Report_September-2023.pdf accessed 23 April 2025.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ ‘The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016: An Analysis | SAHSOL’ <<https://sahsol.lums.edu.pk/node/12862>> accessed 16 June 2025.

⁵⁸ Ibid

These developments have reshaped how individuals engage in digital spaces, cultivating a climate of fear and self-censorship. For example, in March 2025, Farhan Mallick, founder of Raftar (Progressive Media and News Company in Pakistan), was arrested for allegedly running ‘anti-state’ content on their YouTube channel. He was charged under both PECA and the Pakistan Penal Code.⁵⁹ In the same month, a TikTok user was detained for allegedly sharing offensive content targeting senior government and military figures on social media.⁶⁰ Moreover, at least 34+ cases of arrests, detentions, physical assaults, abductions, defamation notices, and online harassment have been reported since the beginning of the year 2025.⁶¹ As per a news report, the law enforcement agencies issued a warning that strict measures will be enforced against individuals misusing social platforms to spread misleading information or provoke dissent.⁶² However, the Federal Investigation Authority (FIA)—the main investigating agency under section 29 of PECA—has not disclosed the exact number of cases that have been initiated under Section 20, the cases that have been made public by the accused appear to focus largely on journalists and civil society actors.

These recent cases reflect a worrying trend of increased use of PECA against journalists and dissenting voices, prompting fresh calls for reforms.⁶³ Under such circumstances where political dissent is quashed, humor and satire become effective tools for counter-narratives as they allow individuals to circumvent censorship and challenge the status quo. However, these forms of expression remain vulnerable to legal reclassification as ‘defamation’ or threats to

⁵⁹ S Abdullah, ‘Journalist Farhan Mallick Sent to Karachi Jail over Alleged ‘Anti-State’ Content’ (Dawn.com) <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1900244>> accessed 23 April 2025.

⁶⁰ Tech Desk, ‘Police Arrest TikTok User in First PECA Case Over Social Media Posts’ (TechJuice, 19 March 2025) <<https://www.techjuice.pk/rawalpindi-police-arrest-tiktok-user-in-first-peca-case-over-social-media-posts/>> accessed 23 April 2025.

⁶¹ ‘Journalists Face Growing Threats to Free Expression in 2025: PPF Report, Digital Rights Tracker, DRF’ <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/pta-denies-reports-of-youtube-channel-blocking-list/> accessed 12 June 2025.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Journalist Junaid Sagar Qureshi Booked Under PECA for ‘False and Provocative’ Video’ (Digital Rights Tracker, DRF) <<https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/journalist-junaid-sagar-qureshi-booked-under-peca-for-false-and-provocative-video/>> accessed 23 April 2025.

national security. To summarize, while constitutional and international guarantees exist to promote the rights to assembly, expression, and privacy, Pakistan exemplifies the gap between legal texts and their practical enforcement. The state's reliance on legal overreach and ambiguous legislative language undermines these rights. It is within this contested space that satire, humor, and digital expression persist—not only as acts of communication but as vital modes of resistance.

3. Humor as Connective Action: The Role of Satire in Mobilizing Counter-Narratives in Pakistan's Digital Landscape

Drawing on interviews with five prominent Pakistani satirists, alongside academic literature and analysis of two case studies, this chapter analyzes how satire intersects with digital mobilization and legal repression and operates as a form of connective action in digital spaces. The Interviewees were asked about the function of satire, their strategies for framing counter-narratives, their perceptions of the communities they engage, and the conversations their content generates. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded with informed consent. Due to potential repercussions related to freedom of expression in Pakistan, participant anonymity is rigorously maintained. This chapter also traces the historical trajectory of satire in Pakistan, examining its role in circumventing censorship, and exploring how satire enables the formation of alternative political discourses in authoritarian settings.

Key findings reveal that humor facilitates political critique by creating personalized, shareable content—such as memes and short-form videos—that skillfully uses wit, irony, and coded language to evade institutional censorship and social backlash. This kind of satirical content cultivates collective critical engagement through online dialogue and shared cultural references, enabling users to question dominant power structures such as political elites and military authorities. In this context, humor and satire reshape the concept of assembly in digital spaces by facilitating decentralized, informal modes of solidarity and resistance despite legal restrictions, social pressures, and surveillance.

3.1. Historical Evolution of Satirical Expression in Pakistan

The tradition of satire in Pakistan has a rich history, originating from the pre-colonial Indo-Pak subcontinent, where it functioned as a crucial medium for social critique and commentary.⁶⁴ Over time, this tradition has transformed significantly. In contemporary contexts, the rise of digital technology and social media has revolutionized this form of expression, facilitating broader engagement and participation among citizens. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become particularly significant for disseminating satirical content, allowing users to create and share memes, videos, and short-form skits that challenge dominant narratives and engage broader audiences—often outside traditional political frameworks.

As one interviewee expressed using the Urdu idiom ‘Who will tie the bell around the camel's neck?’ (similar to the English version ‘Who will bell the cat?’), criticism of powerful state institutions—particularly the military—has long represented a risky endeavor that society recognized as necessary, but few were willing to undertake. Historically, such critique manifested in literature, poetry, and performance art, albeit in subtle or esoteric forms that limited their reach. Reflecting on this, Interviewee A reflected:

‘In Pakistan’s history, critiquing the military has been that task [of belling the cat]... Subtly, the criticism of state institutions has always been there—in new media literature, in art... But the satire was so subtle, or on such an intellectually high ground, that it wasn’t for the masses—only ideologically engaged collectives would understand it.’⁶⁵

The works of iconic poets like Habib Jalib and Ustaad Daaman among many others laid the cultural groundwork for satire as a vehicle of dissent in Pakistan. Jalib, often called the ‘Poet

⁶⁴ H Harder, ‘Towards a Concept of Colonial Satire in South Asian Literatures’ in M Boehm-Tettelbach and HRM Pauwels (eds), *Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity* (2012).

⁶⁵ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

of the People,’ used his verse to openly critique military dictatorships and authoritarian policies, most famously during Ayub Khan’s regime.⁶⁶ His poem ‘Dastoor’ (meaning Constitution) became an anthem for democratic resistance, blending irony and direct critique to challenge state narratives.⁶⁷ Similarly, Ustaad Daaman’s Punjabi poetry employed folk idioms to subvert elitist power structures, as seen in his satirical couplets mocking feudal lords and colonial legacies.⁶⁸ Their work exemplified how pre-digital satire operated through strategic ambiguity—using metaphor and cultural references to evade censorship while fostering collective consciousness among marginalized groups. Interviewee B contextualized this lineage, noting that while the poetry of Jalib and Daaman was largely confined to niche circles, it paved the way for contemporary digital satire.

Although satire has long existed in Pakistan, its form, accessibility, and function have significantly evolved. Earlier forms—rooted in layered language, oral storytelling, and indirect symbolism—resonated primarily with politically aware and ideologically engaged audiences. In contrast, digital platforms have democratized access to political critique, making satire more participatory and widespread.

Where Jalib’s poetry once circulated covertly via cassettes, today’s satirists use algorithmic trends and social media virality to bypass state-controlled media. This shift from oral performance to digital content has not only widened the reach of satire but also altered its impact—enabling content creators to reach wide audiences in real-time and cultivate decentralized forms of resistance.

⁶⁶ S Nazir and MH Khan, ‘Politics of Resistance in Pakistan through Progressive Poetry: A Neo-Gramscian Study’ (2020) 3 South Asian Journal of Social and Environmental Research 147 <https://doi.org/10.36902/sjesr-vol3-iss4-2020> (147-158).

⁶⁷ T Imran, ‘The Intersection of Language, Literature, and Identity: Urdu Poetry as a Reflection of Pakistani Socio-Political Realities’ (2025) 9 Global Political Review 105 <[https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2024\(IX-IV\).09](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2024(IX-IV).09)>.

⁶⁸ Mushtaq Soofi, ‘PUNJAB NOTES: Remembering Ustad Daman: Man Who Confronted the Powerful’ (*Dawn.com*) <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1431933>> accessed 16 June 2025.

Increased internet connectivity has strengthened the capacity for digital dissent, particularly among the youth. However, the state has responded to this growing digital engagement with increasingly restrictive measures—including internet shutdowns, unlawful abductions, and pressure tactics—which serve as strategic tools to suppress dissent and maintain a tight grip on civil mobilization.⁶⁹ For instance, the unlawful abduction of Aun Ali Khosa (discussed in section 3.2), a prominent Pakistani digital creator known for satirical content, exemplifies the crackdown on digital expression in the country.

Academic literature on Internet governance in Pakistan affirms that authorities often bypass legal frameworks, resorting to extrajudicial methods to silence dissent. Scholars also highlight the paradox of satire: while its ambiguity can provide a layer of protection, it simultaneously renders creators more vulnerable to misinterpretation and state retaliation.⁷⁰ These authoritative tactics create a chilling effect on public expression and civic participation, forcing citizens to resort to satire and humor as subtle yet significant forms of resistance.⁷¹

3.2. Case Study 1: ‘Bill Bill Pakistan’ — Song by Aun Ali Khosa

Prominent YouTuber and digital content creator Aun Ali Khosa was abducted in August 2024 after his satirical take on a patriotic song went viral.⁷² The song ‘Bill Bill Pakistan’, a parody of ‘Heart Heart Pakistan’, employed satire to critique socioeconomic and political conditions in Pakistan. A rough translation of both the original and satirical lyrics is as follows:

⁶⁹ M Nadeem, ‘Mimicking Media: Funny Means To Achieve Serious End’ (2012) 4(2) IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science 15 <<https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol4-issue2/C0421519.pdf>> accessed 20 March 2025.

⁷⁰ D Lichtenstein and C Nitsch, ‘Content Analysis in the Research Field of Satire’ in F Oehmer-Pedrazzi and others (eds), *Standardisierte Inhaltsanalyse in der Kommunikationswissenschaft – Standardized Content Analysis in Communication Research* (Springer VS 2023) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36179-2_24

⁷¹ M Boukes, HG Boomgaarden and M Moorman, ‘At Odds: Laughing and Thinking? The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire’ (2015) 65(5) *Journal of Communication* 721 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12173>.

⁷² Z Ur Rahman, ‘Pakistani YouTuber Returns after Alleged Abduction, Draws Attention to Enforced Disappearances’ (Voice of America, 22 August 2024) <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-youtuber-returns-after-alleged-abduction-draws-attention-to-enforced-disappearances-/7753291.html> accessed 3 February 2025.

Original Lyrics	Parody lyrics
<p>Such a fair land, such a clear sky Where else on Earth, where can you find it?</p> <p>May all this light remain ablaze May this caravan be on its way</p> <p><i>My heart is in Pakistan</i> <i>My soul is Pakistan</i></p> <p>When two hearts meet then true love's face is there The face of love is there The face of love is there When on a string one puts flowers so fair Then a wreath is there The face of love is there</p> <p><i>My heart is in Pakistan</i> <i>My soul is Pakistan</i></p> <p>We love our home more than our soul More than our heart It's our guiding star Our home is dearer than our every wish More than our heart It's our guiding star</p> <p><i>My heart is in Pakistan</i> <i>My soul is Pakistan</i>⁷³</p>	<p>Such a land of light, beneath a boundless sky, But where can I go, with this passport by my side?</p> <p>The taxes rise, the bills pile high, And the people? They just struggle to survive</p> <p><i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> The people starve while dreams decay <i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> The rulers feast on everything, and we fade away <i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> I have no money left, my dear <i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> The leaders took it all away.</p> <p>When the bill reveals a hidden tax, The people bear the harshest cracks 'Without begging, how else can we cope?' They say as they extinguish hope</p> <p><i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> This nation stands, hungry and bare <i>Bill Bill Pakistan</i> While leaders dine without a care⁷⁴</p>

⁷³ 'Vital Signs – Dil Dil Pakistan (English Translation)' <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/dil-dil-pakistan-my-heart-pakistan.html> accessed 13 April 2025.

⁷⁴ Urdu lyrics translated using AI. Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUnxpv81fck>

The key themes in the song included:

- Economic hardships, referencing increasing taxes and utility bills cause financial strain on citizens.
- Political critique and governance failures suggest that the rulers of the nation (state and military) have consumed everything and taken it all for themselves, leaving people in distress to fend for themselves.
- Public sentiments highlighted dissatisfaction with the ruling authorities and the poverty of the nation.
- Imperialist policies and Foreign Relations, referencing Pakistan's history of taking loans from the IMF in the name of running the country, while failing to hold leaders accountable for corruption.

The visual elements in the song complemented the lyrics and the satirical tone by using imagery of everyday struggles and a blend of humor and irony to engage the audience while delivering critical commentary. The song, therefore, resonated with many and went viral, leading to widespread sharing on social media platforms. It also attracted attention from the authorities, leading to Aun Ali Khosa's unlawful abduction. Its dual emphasis on the impact of exorbitant electricity bills and criticism of government corruption struck a chord with many Pakistanis—particularly because it was released near Pakistan's Independence Day.

3.3. Case Study 2: 'India-Pakistan Meme-War' as Connective Counter-Narrative

The 2025 India-Pakistan conflict,⁷⁵ marked by the Pahalgam attack on 22 April 2025 that killed 26 civilians, unfolded not only through conventional military responses—such as in Operation

⁷⁵ K Lamb and J Wilson, 'India-Pakistan Military Conflict: What We Know so Far' The Guardian (10 May 2025) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/10/india-pakistan-military-reprisals-escalate-what-we-know-so-far>> accessed 22 May 2025.

Sindoor where India attributed the attack to Pakistan-backed militant groups—but also through a parallel confrontation on digital platforms.⁷⁶ The resulting ‘meme war’⁷⁷ became a major site of public engagement where humor, satire, and misinformation shaped narratives and responses. This case study analyzed how decentralized humor functioned as a form of connective action to disrupt state-aligned propaganda, mitigate geopolitical tensions, and redefine digital modes of assembly and resistance.

This conflict witnessed extensive misinformation campaigns from multiple actors. While Indian outlets falsely reported attacks on Karachi Port and misattributed images,⁷⁸ Pakistani sources also circulated doctored media, reflecting a broader ecosystem of information warfare. AI-generated content, recycled imagery, and video game footage were misused to stimulate real-time conflict.⁷⁹ In response to the misinformation by mainstream media, Pakistani digital creators embedded fact-checking into satirical formats—memes and short videos—to expose contradictions in dominant narratives on both sides.⁸⁰ Their content, often dark and sardonic, parodied exaggerated media reactions, questioned state narratives, and reframed discourse through humor.⁸¹ One example was a meme replying to Indian threats to remove Pakistan from the map with: ‘We’ll rebuild with shakalaka-boom-boom’⁸² (a comedic reference to a popular

⁷⁶ ‘Escalate: Social Media War during the India-Pakistan Conflict, April- May 2025’ (The London Story) <<https://thelondonstory.org/report/escalate-social-media-war-during-the-india-pakistan-conflict-april-may-2025/>> accessed 12 June 2025.

⁷⁷ Siham Basir, ‘India, Pakistan and the Meme-Ification of War’ (DAWN.COM, 12:47:25+05:00) <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1907557>> accessed 12 June 2025.

⁷⁸ Images Staff, ‘Pakistanis Unleash Memes as It Turns out the Only Thing "under Attack" Is Indian Media’s Credibility’ (Images, 15 May 2025) <<https://images.dawn.com/news/1193608>> accessed 22 May 2025.

⁷⁹ ‘New Report: Inside the Misinformation and Disinformation War Between India and Pakistan’ (Center for the Study of Organized Hate) <<https://www.csohate.org/press-releases/new-report-inside-the-misinformation-and-disinformation-war-between-india-and-pakistan/>> accessed 12 June 2025.

⁸⁰ G Mihăilescu, ‘Never Mess With the “Memers”’: How Meme Creators Are Redefining Contemporary Politics’ (2024) Social Media + Society <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241296256>.

⁸¹ ‘Hashtag Geopolitics: Understanding the Power of Memes in the India-Pakistan Conflict | Lowy Institute’ <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/hashtag-geopolitics-understanding-power-memes-india-pakistan-conflict>> accessed 22 May 2025.

⁸² R Q Mir, ‘I Sent Her Water Bottles, Not Missiles’: Meme Diplomacy Amid India-Pakistan Tensions’ (Kashmir Times, 3 May 2025) <https://kashmirtimes.com/news/i-sent-her-water-bottles-not-missiles> accessed 22 May 2025.

Indian children's show where objects were magically produced). Such replies reflected insights from interviewee B, who observed that humor 'disarms rage' by highlighting geopolitical absurdities.

Indian digital responses, in contrast, tended to be more nationalistic, shaped by the political climate under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government⁸³. Many users called for escalation, sharing content that emphasized security threats and national pride.⁸⁴ While some acknowledged the creativity of Pakistani satire, others viewed it as inappropriate given the conflict's gravity.⁸⁵ These divergent digital behaviors reflect structural and ideological differences: in Pakistan's hybrid authoritarian context, satire offers an indirect means of dissent, whereas, in India, digital mobilization often aligns with nationalist narratives.

The meme war illustrated how personalized digital humor operated as a form of soft power. Coined by political scientist Joseph Nye,⁸⁶ the term 'soft power' is the ability to shape preferences and perceptions through culture, values, and ideology.⁸⁷ Academic research on meme warfare suggests that such approaches can shape perceptions through cultural identity and political positioning.⁸⁸ However, critics argue that the use of humor in geopolitical contexts can also trivialize serious diplomatic crises.⁸⁹

In conclusion, the digital dimensions of the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict reveal the complex interplay between traditional statecraft and contemporary information warfare.⁹⁰ While satire

⁸³ M Feyyaz and SH Bari, 'A Critical Analysis of India and Pakistan's Terrorism Discourse in the Context of Geopolitics and Imperialism' (2024) 17(3) *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 606 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2360274>.

⁸⁴ 'Hashtag Geopolitics' (n 72).

⁸⁵ Basir (n 77).

⁸⁶ J S Nye, 'Soft Power' (1990) (80) *Foreign Policy* 153 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁸⁷ 'Hashtag Geopolitics' (n 72).

⁸⁸ 'Hashtag Geopolitics' (n 72).

⁸⁹ Basir (n 77).

⁹⁰ N Khan, 'The Information Crisis That Brought India and Pakistan to the Brink' (Tech Policy Press, 2 June 2025) <https://techpolicy.press/the-information-crisis-that-brought-india-and-pakistan-to-the-brink> accessed 12 June 2025.

demonstrated the potential for non-state actors to influence conflict dynamics, the broader environment was characterized by extensive misinformation from multiple sources.⁹¹ The case illustrates both the democratizing potential of digital content—to challenge official narratives—and its capacity to amplify false information and potentially escalate tensions.⁹²

It should be noted that this remains a developing story. The analysis is therefore provisional, and further research is required to assess the longer-term impact of this digital confrontation on regional politics and global public opinion. Future work could further explore the intersection of cultural expression, political resistance, and information warfare in digitally mediated conflicts.

3.4. Humor and Comedy Through the Lens of Connective Action

In Pakistan's authoritarian context, where direct dissent often invites repression, humor functions not merely as entertainment but as a tactical form of expression. Culture produces comedy—but comedy, in turn, produces culture. The jokes we make, who we mock, and who remains 'off-limits' reveal the contours of power in any society. As Interviewee B aptly put it, 'If we can joke about it, we can talk about it.'⁹³ Comedy becomes an entry point—often the only one—into conversations that formal institutions refuse to allow.

Bennett and Segerberg's connective action framework offers insights into how humor functions as digitally mediated dissent. Unlike traditional collective action that relies on formal

⁹¹ Center for the Study of Organized Hate, 'New Report: Inside the Misinformation and Disinformation War Between India and Pakistan' <https://www.csohate.org/press-releases/new-report-inside-the-misinformation-and-disinformation-war-between-india-and-pakistan/> accessed 12 June 2025.

⁹² 'Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 'Missiles and Misinformation: False Claims about the India-Pakistan Clashes Reach Millions on X' https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/missiles-and-misinformation-false-claims-about-the-india-pakistan-clashes-reach-millions-on-x/ accessed 12 June 2025.

⁹³ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

organizational structures and collective identity, connective action operates through personalized expression and digital sharing, making humor an effective mobilization tool.⁹⁴

Participants consistently emphasized that satire offered a safer, more accessible mode of critique. As Interviewee C stated, ‘I frame my satire in a way that addresses issues instead of taking sides. The language I use is to not offend but to frame debates as questions for engagement.’⁹⁵ This strategy aligns with ‘personalized action frames,’ where individuals remix humorous content to reflect concerns—effectively turning satire into a participatory political tool.

What emerges is not an organized protest, but a fluid network of dissent—a form of ‘networked individualism’ where thousands ring the bell once one person dares to hang it. As another Interviewee A noted, ‘Now that the bell has been hung, everyone is ringing it.’⁹⁶ This captures the core of connective action: a decentralized, digitally amplified cascade of critique that can bypass censorship and control. Importantly, humor not only facilitates participation—it also tempers fear. Participants reported satirical content garnered more engagement than serious political critique and fostered tolerance by softening ideological boundaries. As Interviewee D noted, ‘Humor builds tolerance because it’s not a direct attack on the ideas people hold—it opens up room to laugh, then think.’⁹⁷

Case study 2 in Section 3.3 builds on the discourse and challenges the academic frameworks that often interpret resistance solely through the lens of formal protest or textual dissent. Instead, it calls for greater attention to digital play’s subversive power—particularly in authoritarian contexts where humor may be one of the few expressive freedoms.

⁹⁴ Bennett and Segerberg (n 30).

⁹⁵ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

⁹⁶ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

⁹⁷ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

The findings further suggest that digital humor enables protestors to assert sincerity, confront hegemonic narratives, and challenge apathy or fear.⁹⁸ Satirists in Pakistan, through their craft, function not only as critics but also as cultural translators and community builders. Through what I term ‘the connective logic of satire’, satirists open spaces where laughter becomes a shared language of resistance—and where the audience is not merely a passive observer but an active participant. This aligns with existing scholarship on satire as a form of dissent and satirists as opinion leaders in restricted environments.⁹⁹

3.5. Regulation of Humor

As assembly and expression face increasing restrictions (detailed in sections 2.3 and 2.4), humorous connective action offers valuable insights into how citizens maintain spaces for counter-narratives within a legally and culturally constricted environment.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 is the most significant legal framework affecting digital expression in Pakistan. Although aimed at combatting online hate speech and cybercrime, PECA has been criticized for being overly draconian and infringing on the rights to privacy and freedom of speech by international human rights organizations.¹⁰⁰ While PECA ostensibly targets hate speech, it disproportionately silences government critics. Its vague language and discretionary enforcement makes it an ideal tool for selective suppression.¹⁰¹ As interviewee C notes, these written policies enable arbitrary enforcement: ‘If they want to arrest you, they can do it on any grounds.’¹⁰² Research shows that activists have been accused of

⁹⁸ Korkut and others (n 6).

⁹⁹ Victoria L Crittenden, Lucas M Hopkins and JM Simmons, ‘Satirists as Opinion Leaders: Is Social Media Redefining Roles?’ (2011) 11 *Journal of Public Affairs* 174.

¹⁰⁰ Z Abbas and others, ‘Cyber Laws and Media Censorship in Pakistan: An Investigation of Governmental Tactics to Curtail Freedom of Expression and Right to Privacy’ (2023) *Journal of Creative Communications* 09732586231206913 <https://doi.org/10.1177/09732586231206913> accessed 12 May 2025.

¹⁰¹ Zahid Shahab Ahmed and others, ‘Contestations of Internet Governance and Digital Authoritarianism in Pakistan’ [2024] *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10767-024-09493-2>> accessed 3 February 2025.

¹⁰² Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 12, 2025).

blasphemy, surveilled and arrested for anti-state tweets, or silenced when their morality is questioned by social media actors, often influenced by political interests.¹⁰³

However, PECA's enforcement operates within broader social and political expectations predating the law. These informal norms—rooted in Pakistan's history of military dominance, religious conservatism, and patronage networks—create a structured system of self-regulation rather than arbitrary suppression. For instance, 88% of Pakistani journalists report self-censoring content related to the military, religious minorities, or blasphemy allegations, even without direct legal threats.¹⁰⁴ This reflects a systemic socialization process where creators internalize boundaries to avoid repercussions ranging from social ostracization to extralegal violence. As interviewee A, a media professional, observed:

‘There's a written policy and an unwritten policy... More than the laws, it's the unwritten policy that should be feared.’¹⁰⁵

Similarly, interviewee D noted that ‘people respond more to culture than to laws,’¹⁰⁶ suggesting that vague legislation produces fear not solely through ambiguity but through a broader culture of repression, surveillance, and conformity. Multiple participants emphasized self-censorship as a survival strategy within a system governed by both formal and informal controls¹⁰⁷—a dynamic that is better understood as a part of a historically embedded system of social regulation.

¹⁰³ A Khan, A Khwaja and A Jawed, Navigating Civic Spaces During a Pandemic: Pakistan Report (The Institute of Development Studies and Partner Organisations 2020) <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/16543> accessed 12 May 2025.

¹⁰⁴ ‘88% Pakistani Journalists Self Censor in Professional and 79% in Personal Settings; New Research Study Reveals — Media Matters for Democracy’ <https://mediamatters.pk/88-pakistani-journalists-self-censor-in-professional-and-79-in-personal-settings-new-research-study-reveals-2/> accessed 23 May 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁶ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 24, 2025).

¹⁰⁷ D Bar-Tal, ‘Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research’ (2017) 38(S1) Political Psychology 37 <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12391> accessed 12 June 2025.

In this context, self-censorship emerges as a rational adaptation to a system of normative boundaries—both formal and informal—that are reinforced through social sanctions, legal ambiguity, and cultural expectations.¹⁰⁸ However, interview data also indicates signs of a cultural shift. Digital humor, particularly satire disseminated through memes and short-form content, is gradually expanding the boundaries of permissible discourse. Once-taboo institutions, including the military, are increasingly subjects of irony, parody, and coded critique. Satire thus functions as a slow-moving yet potent form of boundary negotiation.¹⁰⁹

While legal ambiguity and social norms are weaponized to curtail dissent, humor enables connective action—the formation of collective identities and participation outside institutional frameworks. Because satire is often ambiguous, humorous speech can remain legible to the public while slipping beneath state censorship.¹¹⁰

3.6. Effectiveness and Limitations of Humor as Connective Action

Drawing on research insights, it is evident that while humor, particularly satire, can be a powerful tool for mobilizing counter-narratives and opening discursive spaces in restrictive environments, it also has inherent limitations. Key themes emphasized by the participants are illustrated in the diagram below, followed by a detailed discussion.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ S Ödmark and J Harvard, 'The Democratic Roles of Satirists' (2021) 19(4) Popular Communication 281 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2021.1929995> accessed 12 June 2025.

¹¹⁰ MPP Reyes, 'Untouchable, or Merely Untouched? Satirical News Websites and Freedom of Expression Limitations in Southeast Asia in the Age of Online "Fake News"' (2020) in Digital Culture and Humanities 51 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7341-5_3 accessed 12 June 2025.

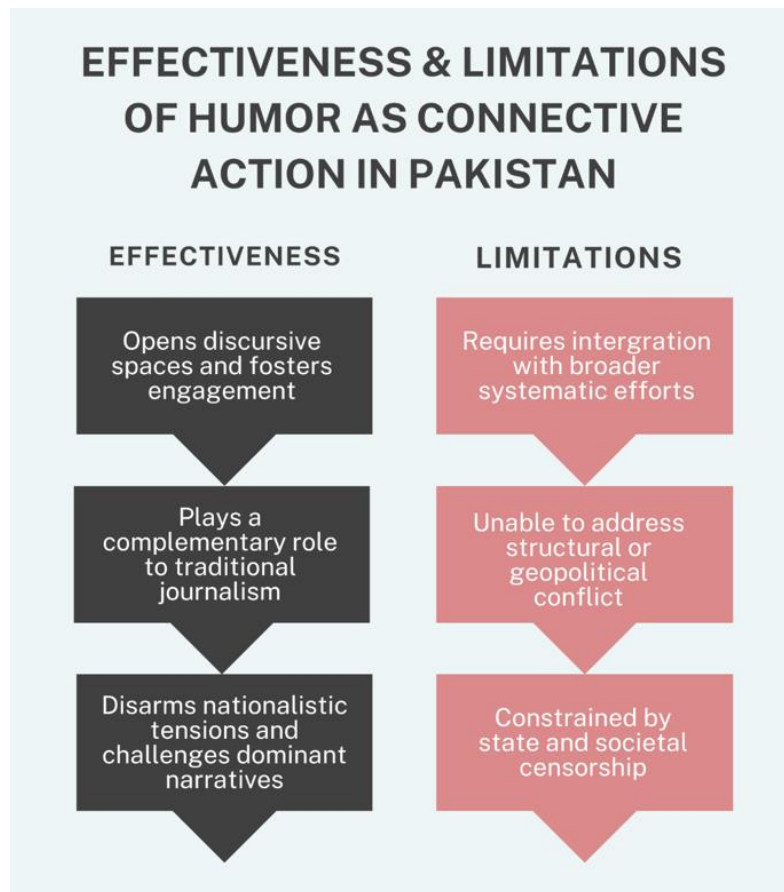


Figure 1: The effectiveness and limitations of humor as a tool for digital resistance (source: author's illustration)

Participants emphasized that although satire can foster engagement, it cannot function as a standalone strategy. Interviewee A noted that building effective counter-narratives requires a holistic approach that extends beyond humor, incorporating policy advocacy, education, and sustained media engagement. This observation aligns with Karpf's critical assessment of digital activism,¹¹¹ which warns that online expression—however viral—must be embedded in broader political and cultural processes to generate lasting impact. Humor may catalyze critique, but critique alone does not constitute change. Digital satire plays a complementary rather than substitutive role relative to traditional journalism; it dramatizes social contradictions and challenges dominant narratives, but primarily functions at an aesthetic level where critique

¹¹¹ D Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (Oxford University Press 2012) <https://academic.oup.com/book/5093> accessed 23 May 2025.

becomes the impetus for humor, which is then resolved through amusement.¹¹² It stages a conflict within its comic form rather than revealing or resolving a deeper continuity in the real world.¹¹³ Therefore, it must operate alongside more institutional forms of engagement to be transformative.

Participants also noted the limitations of humor in addressing structural or geopolitical conflict. In moments where satire appears to disarm nationalistic tensions—for example, in the context of India-Pakistan 'meme wars' (section 3.3)—these interventions cannot replace formal diplomacy or conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Another critical constraint is censorship—both state-imposed and internalized. Certain topics remain off-limits due to legal risk or taboo. Satirists are often caught between pushing boundaries and managing backlash. One participant reflected:

‘Sometimes you make mistakes because with comedy you're always pushing boundaries... you do mess up. We need to allow for that—after all, you can't know where the boundaries are unless you push them.’¹¹⁴

This tension highlights the paradox of humor in authoritarian contexts: its power lies in its transgression, yet this carries the risk of erasure or punishment. The findings thus underscore that while humor facilitates connective action by mobilizing shared sentiments, its potential is contingent, fragile, and context-dependent. The spread of personalized action frames like memes, relies on the availability of political openings and cultural conditions that make such

¹¹² N Holm, ‘The Limits of Satire, or the Reification of Cultural Politics’ (2023) Thesis Eleven <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136231154266> accessed 23 May 2025.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, April 25, 2025).

content resonate. Without systemic support and real-world integration, humor may serve primarily as an emotional release rather than a driver of meaningful political change.

3.7. Dissent vs. Co-option

While humor serves as a powerful tool for dissent and challenging dominant narratives, the research reveals a more complex dynamic: the co-option of humor by powerful institutions.¹¹⁵ Interviewee E described being contacted by the military and asked to create a funny video mocking a political figure¹¹⁶. This demonstrated that state actors recognize the effectiveness of satire in shaping public opinion and controlling narratives. Like the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan, which has co-opted online humorous content, especially memes, to attack the opposition,¹¹⁷ the military in Pakistan appears to use humor for agenda-setting and narrative control. The interviewee's refusal to engage in this request underscores the agency of creators in resisting co-option, but the attempt itself highlights the dual nature of humor's power—it can be wielded by both the disempowered and powerful. The Azerbaijan case illustrates how government-sponsored memes can be malicious tools for trolling, harassing, and controlling narratives, part of a 'soft authoritarian tool kit'.¹¹⁸ This comparative insight underscores that humor is not inherently a tool for positive change or dissent; its impact depends on who creates and disseminates it and why.

¹¹⁵ Pearce and Hajizada (n 21).

¹¹⁶ Interview with anonymous participant (Zoom, May 6, 2025).

¹¹⁷ Pearce and Hajizada (n 21).

¹¹⁸ Pearce and Hajizada (n 21).

4. Discussion: The Connective Logic of Satire in Pakistan's Digital Assembly

This research demonstrates that humor, particularly satire, serves as a vital mode of connective action in Pakistan's increasingly restricted digital landscape. Satirists and content creators are redefining assembly—not through physical gatherings, but by leveraging the viral nature of humor to create discursive spaces for dissent. These digital 'counter publics' allow critique of dominant institutions, particularly the military, while evading legal constraints of PECA and the potent power of unwritten social norms.

The strength of digital humor lies not in immediate policy change but in its capacity-building potential—it reshapes the cultural imagination, expands the boundaries of what can be questioned, and empowers participation in otherwise inaccessible political discourse. This aligns with broader academic interest in how digital platforms can enhance engagement and participation.¹¹⁹

The growing reliance on digital platforms for political expression in Pakistan presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, satire enables citizens to circumvent authoritarian restrictions and express dissent in coded creative ways. On the other, such acts of digital resistance come at a cost. Creators face legal persecution, harassment, and reputational damage due to the ambiguous application of PECA and conservative social norms.

These dynamics have constitutional and human rights implications. While Article 16 of Pakistan's Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, the criminalization of digital dissent under PECA—often framed as 'cyberterrorism'—extends authoritarian control into the online sphere. As the UN Human Rights Office has emphasized in multiple reports,¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ K Koc-Michalska and D Lilleker, 'Digital Politics: Mobilization, Engagement, and Participation' (2016) 34(1) Political Communication 1 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1243178> accessed 23 May 2025.

¹²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association' UN Doc A/HRC/50/42 (2022)

cybercrime and anti-terrorism laws often conflate digital expression with physical threats, violating international standards and eroding the essence of assembly and expression rights online.

Pakistan's experience illustrates a key paradox: digital counter-narratives are both liberatory and limiting. While satire circumvents formal censorship, invisible lines drawn by social decorum and political pressure still restrict expression. As digital authoritarianism intensifies, the need for multi-pronged protections—as urged by the UN—becomes increasingly urgent. This includes strengthening data privacy laws, investing in digital literacy, and building formal partnerships between civil society organizations, journalists, and legal advocates to translate online activism into coordinated, real-world impact.

Considering these challenges, this thesis culminated in a capstone project that bridges research and practice. The interactive educational website¹²¹—featuring a predictive AI chatbot—was developed as a practical extension of this thesis. Drawing from legal analysis and the interview data, it serves as a knowledge and capacity-building tool for content creators in Pakistan providing accessible information on relevant laws, social and cultural norms, risk mitigation strategies, and online safety practices. The AI Chatbot is predictive¹²² (not generative) and trained on a dataset that includes the legal documents, safety guidelines issued by legislative bodies and digital rights organizations in Pakistan, as well as insights gathered from the research participants.

Through humor and satire, Pakistani creators are facilitating the creation of 'digital counter publics'¹²³—not physical gatherings, but rather discursive spaces formed through the sharing

¹²¹ 'Educational Guide for Satire' <<https://sites.google.com/view/pk-creatorguide/home>> accessed 15 June 2025.

¹²² 'Educational Guide for Satire - Ask AI' (n 1).

¹²³ N Venema, 'Counterpublics and Structural Change in Media and Politics: A Theoretical Framework on Transformations Within a Long-Term Historical Perspective' (2024) 31(2) *Javnost - The Public* 231 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2024.2342216>.

and discussion of humorous content. Through the term ‘connective logic of satire,’ I build on the connective action framework,¹²⁴ to show how creators open spaces where laughter can initiate dialogue and engagement, even on sensitive political and social issues, and foster participation outside formal organizational structures. Participants noted that their content sparked discussion—sometimes including hate speech—confirming public engagement. Humor lowers the threshold for engagement; making it easier for people to engage with political and social issues that might otherwise seem risky.¹²⁵

Satire thus serves both as a communicative bridge and a collective coping mechanism, fostering solidarity and shared experience within a challenging socio-political climate.¹²⁶ However, humor’s dual role as a tool for dissent and a potential instrument of state co-option highlights the ongoing struggle for control over narratives in the digital space. The restrictive legal framework, particularly PECA, and the pervasive surveillance mean that this form of digital assembly remains fragile. While humor helps evade physical suppression and some legal constraints, threats of online harassment, legal action, and self-censorship persist.

Ultimately, this study underscores that Pakistani digital creators are not merely entertainers, but political actors engaged in a sophisticated form of resistance. Through humor, they challenge hegemonic narratives, carve out space for dissent, and maintain a civic common in cyberspace. Their work affirms that humor is neither trivial nor apolitical—it is a strategic communicative tool, a site of agency, and a key resource for democratic resilience in an era of growing repression.

¹²⁴ Bennett and Segerberg (n 30).

¹²⁵ RV Kutz-Flamenbaum, ‘Humor and Social Movements’ (2014) 8(3) *Sociology Compass* 294 <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12138> accessed 23 May 2025.

¹²⁶ Korkut and others (n 6).

Conclusion

The thesis set out to examine how humor and satire in digital spaces function as tools for connective action, enabling alternative forms of expression, assembly, and the mobilization of counter-narratives in Pakistan's increasingly restrictive political environment. Drawing on the academic literature, qualitative interviews with content creators, legal analysis of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), and case studies from Pakistan, the research revealed that humor and satire play an essential and multi-faceted role in Pakistan's digital landscape. It not only circumvents formal censorship but also fosters shared discourse that enables civic participation and informal digital assembly, even as it remains vulnerable to co-optation and suppression by state and non-state actors.

By enabling personalized expression and sharing, satire allows individuals to critique powerful institutions and challenge repressive norms, even under laws like PECA and prevailing social pressures. However, the power of humor is not unidirectional; the research demonstrates that state actors also strategically deploy humor to reinforce dominant narratives, highlighting the ongoing contestation for influence in the digital space. Comparative examples from other authoritarian contexts—Azerbaijan and Indonesia—further emphasize both the risks faced by dissenting voices and the creative strategies employed by regimes to manage discourse. These insights underscore the global relevance of the Pakistani case, as digital authoritarianism increasingly shapes both online and offline civic spaces.

Despite the persistent constraints, digital humor in Pakistan enhances critical engagement and political awareness by offering counter-narratives in relatable, culturally resonant forms. This process incrementally expands the boundaries of acceptable speech, enabling diverse voices to participate more actively in civic discussions. At the same time, the research acknowledges limitations: humor's impact is often contingent on the broader political and social context, and

its ability to effect systemic change is constrained by legal repression, algorithmic suppression, and the risk of co-optation. The findings suggest that while satire is a powerful tool for fostering solidarity and challenging state narratives, its transformative potential is most fully realized when it is embedded within broader advocacy networks and supported by accessible legal and educational resources.

Beyond its theoretical contributions to the literature on digital activism and connective action in the Global South, this thesis addresses a critical practical gap. The capstone project—an interactive educational guide with a predictive AI chatbot tailored for Pakistani content creators—translates academic insights into an actionable resource. By equipping creators with the knowledge and tools to navigate legal risks and make informed decisions, the project aims to strengthen digital expression and resilience in Pakistan’s challenging environment. This initiative also offers a replicable model for translating scholarship into context-specific interventions that support democratic resilience elsewhere.

The work of Pakistani satirists demonstrates that humor is far from trivial; it is a strategic communicative tool, deeply intertwined with the struggle for freedom of expression and the negotiation of power in a digitally mediated, authoritative context. This thesis ultimately argues for recognizing cultural resistance—particularly humor and satire—as urgent sites of political participation. As digital authoritarianism grows, so too must our creative, critical, and interdisciplinary strategies for protecting expressive freedoms—both through scholarship and practical interventions. By understanding how humor operates as resistance, especially at the intersection of technology and democracy, this research contributes to strengthening democratic resilience in an era of rising uncertainty and authoritarian control.

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