

# PERFORMATIVITY AND POLICING DISSENT: PATRONAGE AND DIGITAL POWER IN PAKISTAN'S SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN LIGHT OF GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGY

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## Abstract

This paper examines how the performativity of patronage is mobilized and weaponized using the case study of pietism and impiety in Pakistan across pre-digital and digital contexts. The concept of performativity in the context of doctrinal values has been discussed using the pre- and post-Zia-ul-Haq regimes. Using a longitudinal case study, we have compared patterns of patronage and legitimization of fanatic elements before the rise of digital media with their contemporary online manifestations. Drawing on Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical analysis, the study interprets these dynamics as strategic performances in which actors curate devotional identities to gain legitimacy, authority, and influence. Our inferences reveal that while pre-digital performances relied on institutional and social networks, digital platforms amplify visibility, accelerate validation, and intensify exclusionary narratives. Front-stage performances of pietism are increasingly decoupled from back-stage practices, enabling the manipulation of moral authority at scale. These have been explained using discourse analysis, using speeches and events to portray the actions played out by the political actors. The shift to pietism within politics and society has significant implications for the construction of social reality, particularly in reinforcing stigma and marginalization. By situating micro-sociological insights within broader political and technological transformations, our research contributes to interdisciplinary debates on dogma, digital media, and power, highlighting how performative piety evolves as both a social strategy and a tool of ideological control.

## Keywords

performativity, dramaturgy, front-stage, back-stage

## Introduction

Pakistan's socio-political development is directly affected by dogma-based ideologies, a factor that regulates behaviors in societal and institutional models. The performativity of devoutness is often patronage-driven (Javaid, 2018). One of the most controversial features of these performances is the weaponization of doctrinal transgressions and impiety accusations that can quell public debate and reconfigure power relations throughout the country (Siddique & Hayat, 2008). Our paper explores the intersection of patronage, performative pietism, and strategic uses of impiety weaponization. It is divided into three time-periods, situated pre- Zia, during Zia and post-General Zia ul Haq's government. These periods are characterized by ideological, legislative, and cultural shifts (Jalal, 2008).

As a Muslim majority country, Pakistan has undergone identity shifts with a significant one taking place under General Zia ul-Haq's government (Rahman, 2023) which prompted us to use his regime to divide the time-periods for our analysis. General Zia-ul-Haq was a military ruler who introduced conservative narrowly interpreted faith inspired values in Pakistan

(Rahman, 2023). It was through this state-driven agenda that General Zia aimed to connect the nation with conservative theistic values as a basis for national identity. These policies reoriented the country's identity and institutionalized performative pietism through laws like the Hudood Ordinances (the Hudood meaning 'divine limits') and strict religious offences legislations (Nasr, 2004). These laws enacted in Pakistan in 1979 included four perceived sins: the offence of Zina (adultery and fornication), the offence of Qazf (false accusations of adultery and fornication), the prohibition order, banning the consumption of alcohol with punishments like lashes, and the offences against property (Kennedy, 1996). This came into effect alongside strict doctrine transgression laws (Haqqani, 2005; Lau, 2006). The established laws transformed piety performativity into a political weapon which the government used for power struggles, social exclusion, and personal attacks (Kennedy, 1996). The state restructured its patronage system to reward those who followed its narrative by granting access to resources and political office (Hayat, 2008; Weiss, 1986) leading to actors' performances inspired by such values.

Applying Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis theory, our research identified actors performing "front-stage" acts of public pietism for political purposes. Likewise, the "back-stage" revealed these actors relaxing these performative requirements and/or revealing their actual goals (Zuboff, 2019). Our paper thus inferred patterns through historical transformations that enabled the emergence of performative pietism and its connection with doctrinal offence claims. We also examined the role of digital media in reconfiguring these dynamics (Mustafa & Brown, 2005).

Digital technologies have brought forth a new level of complexity to these social dynamics by transforming how people highlight religious identities and accuse others of religious offences. Digital platforms including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and WhatsApp provide a medium for people to employ religious displays as performances including those of accusations which gain enhanced visibility through algorithmic mechanisms (Lau, 2006). Digital performances differ from traditional "front-stage" displays because they exist to generate viral engagement and algorithm-based benefits, which promote doctrinal conformity and weaponization of accusations based on transgressions and omissions of the doctrine (Gillespie, 2018).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The intersection of patronage, performativity, and doctrinal offence-related allegations in the socio-political landscape of Pakistan has been exhaustively researched at the historical, performative, and digital levels. This literature review consolidated findings from existing sources, offering a synoptic foundation for the study. We identified various academic trends to group existing research for this review. Each trend is presented as a sub-section. We also identified a gap in the research mentioned at the end of the section.

The origins of patronage and performativity in Pakistan have roots interwoven with the nation's changing political and religious context. Zaman (2002) examined the role of the Ulema as a force for transformation in shaping religious and political thought (Newberg, 1995). An Ulema is a religious cleric that has often attained religious education through either formal or informal means (Zaman, 2002). The work showed how Zia-ul-Haq's theological socialization in the late 1970 and 1980s formalized a conservative didactic identity, a shift from the comparatively secular patronage systems of pre-Zia times (Siddiq, 2007). He highlighted the socio-political realignment where public expressions of religiosity were rewarded and were internalized by political actors (Newberg, 1995).

## Role of Digital Media in Transforming Narratives

Departing from bodily performances, social media spaces have become stages for the enactment of religious identity and the dissemination of doctrinal offence accusations (Shah & Basit, 2016). Schoemaker (2016) examines how online sites realign traditional performances of religiosity. The dissertation highlights the usage of algorithms for the purpose of making them viral, making digital piety a highly visible and active aspect of socio-political discourse. Schoemaker's (2016) critique also sheds light on the hybridity of digital spaces, where younger populations traverse the spectrum between performances of the body and digital spaces, further entangling intergenerational dynamics and social norms.

The works we reviewed collectively shed light on the historical, performative, and digital aspects of Pakistan's socio-political landscape. Talbot (2012) and Siddique and Hayat (2008) give a historical basis for understanding the performative religiosity institutionalization and religious defamation laws, whereas Grimes (2012) provides theoretical insights into the ritual dimensions of these performances. Schoemaker (2016) fills the gap between classical and online environments, underlining the revolutionary impact of social media in projecting and challenging performative religiosity.

## The Research Gap

The research gap being addressed is the lack of a longitudinal perspective on how pre- and post-Zia periods panned out in contemporary digital religious discourse. Moreover, three comparative periods have been used to enhance the understanding of the changes being made to doctrinal performativity. Also, there was an absence of a performative dramaturgical lens in political analysis, using Goffman's analysis to dissect state behavior, political rhetoric and religious legitimacy. Not only this paper strengthens the integration of patronage, power and digital amplification. While existing literature examines patronage and digital fundamentalism, it lacks integration or longitudinal analysis.

As mentioned in the introduction, we found Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) was best suited for analysis. Goffman (1959) explained how individuals undertake performances to influence how they are perceived by others. These performances are informed by not just speech and/or the written word, but also through various other factors such as clothing, gestures/body language, etc (Hussain, 1994). When we are meeting others, we display what Goffman referred to as the front-stage. In private, this changes to the back-stage where performativity is dropped (Goffman, 1959). There is a vast difference between the behaviors of both these stages. The front-stage requires performances to manage impressions of how we are viewed. Regarding our case study, performativity included pietism in deference to patronage. These performances are for intended audiences, and the audiences and performances may differ according the need (Goffman, 1959). Thus, we operationalized our paper by examining the front-stage and the back-stage. This included the usage of language, adherence to norms in line with perceived dogmatic correctness. After 1988, when Zia-ul-Haq's regime ended, religion became a tool that was now going to be used in the field of politics to attain the support of masses (Zahid, 2011). With the advance of the internet, dogmas went online and found amplification.

## **Methodology**

To address the aims and the use of our chosen framework, a short explanation of the methodology we employed was warranted. We used a qualitative analysis based on the deductive approach. Our research framework made use of a longitudinal case study whereby we divided our analysis into three time-periods. Goffman's performativity theory (1959) was employed using discourse analysis. We kept the ontological and epistemological ideals of our

constructivist approach intact since we did not compare two different cases but rather the same case under different time-periods.

To carry out the study, we mapped the historical development of patronage and performative piety along with weaponized doctrinal based transgression accusations. Data was sourced from secondary sources, such as recorded speeches, journal articles and books. For the third time-period, we also used primary data from online sources. We examined relevant discourses and then operationalized the theory accordingly. Given the case study was that of performativity in Pakistan, there was an adequate material found. Since the phenomenon we were examining was that of performativity and patronage, we chose pietism and its weaponization in Pakistan as a case study because it seemed an ongoing relevant issue in the country.

It should be noted that while we applied the framework to the various time-periods in as homogenous a manner as possible, we were aware of the limitations of the framework. Regarding the takeaway from analysis using performativity and identity-based theories, the correct term is inference, not data (Korte, 2007). We acknowledge that we carried out a theoretical exercise using existing data with the aim of gaining insight from inferences or interpretive findings.

### **Research question**

This sub-section covered the research question we used to conduct our enquiry. Rather than multiple questions in the form of primary questions or one primary question with two or more sub-questions, we decided on one question which would be applied to all three time-periods.

How has state patronage impacted doctrinal practices resulting in accusatory performativity in digital and non-digital spaces in Pakistan?

This question accounted for two different forums of accusatory practices making it possible to also analyze whether internet connectivity has had an impact on such performances. The first two time-periods did not involve digital spaces because they were before the social media age. Yet, we used the time-periods to assess changes in patterns over time. The third time-period covered bodily digital performances, thereby giving us insight into the internet's impact on these performances.

This question was answered in the analysis section following a brief literature review, theoretical framework section and methodology section.

### **Case Study**

A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in the articulation of pietism and identity, the framing of piety, and the mobilization of doctrinal symbolism for political purposes. We have analyzed Pakistan, through a historical lens by dividing it into three parts. Our study commenced with the analysis of the Pre-Zia time-period from 1947-1977, which is the time of fluid performativity. During this time, religious identity was largely seen as a private matter rather than a matter of public discourse. Then comes the second section, which is based on the actions taken under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime where, state-centric pietism performativity was formalized through acts such as Hudood Ordinance. Then the consequences of the actions taken by Zia during his regime are discussed in the third section, which discusses the post-Zia period. This is where contemporary political parties have used religion as a tool of performance, reiterating the standards of performativity set by Zia-ul-Haq. To be able to analyze the performativity, politics and piety of three different time periods, we have used Dramaturgical analysis.

### **Time-period 1: pre-Zia period analysis (1947-1977)**

The pre-Zia time-period (1947–1977) was relatively secular and institutionally pluralist during which faith was symbolic rather than salient. Public pietism and allegations of impiety were not yet institutionalized and codified to a great extent. The state's initial concern was nation-building in the wake of Partition trauma and the difficulty of creating cohesion in a post-colonial, multi-ethnic society (Jalal, 1995; Talbot, 2000). Partition trauma describes the collective and individual suffering experienced by millions of people during and after 1947. The creation of two states triggered one of the largest forced migrations in modern history, in which around 14–15 million people crossed borders, often under extreme violence and fear. Families were separated, entire communities disappeared, and many people experienced loss, displacement, and long-term psychological distress (Shaikh, 2009).

In this period, patronage networks were primarily based on bureaucratic-military arrangements, kin affiliations, and ethnic loyalties, not dogmatic credentials (Alavi, 1972; Waseem, 1994). The inherited British colonial state's civil-military bureaucracy served as the preponderant power arbitrator. Politicians depended significantly on feudal landlords, tribal chiefs, and civil administrators to exert influence, not on clerical coalitions or public demonstrations of piety (Sayeed, 1967; Rizvi, 2000).

The first constitutional step taken by parliament was to table and pass the Objectives Resolution (1949) giving Pakistan an official trajectory and identity (Waseem, 2010; Newberg, 1995; Lau, 2006). Despite every religious minority member of parliament voicing concern that their communities would become second class citizens and/or be marginalized, a theological identity became ideological grounding of the state. Yet its wording was intentionally ambiguous and adaptable to liberal interpretation (Binder, 1961; Burki, 1986). Figures such as former Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan and General Ayub Khan (a former military dictator) prioritized modernist conceptions of this identity, more ethical than legalistic avoiding orthodox dogmatic domination of legislation (Esposito, 1998; Nasr, 2001; Weiss, 1986).

Despite the Objectives Resolution, dogmatically aligned political parties in Pakistan have historically demonstrated limited electoral success despite their significant ideological influence. The Jamaat-e-Islami, founded in 1941 has been central in shaping South Asian religious-political discourse, grounding its legitimacy in the implementation of scriptural laws. Despite its organizational coherence and ideological intensity, the party remained relatively constrained in translating this influence into mass electoral mobilization (Ahmad, 1964; Zaman, 2002). However, this electoral limitation of the JI and other such ideological parties did not impact their substantial street power, mobilizing large-scale protests and influencing state policy through agitation rather than institutional dominance. This was evident in movements such as the anti-Ahmadi agitations of the 1950s and 1974, as well as the anti-Zulfikar Ali Bhutto protests led under the umbrella of the Pakistan National Alliance (Ahmad, 1964; Zaman, 2002). These movements revealed a pattern, whereby religious-fueled mobilizations were observed operating through disruptive public action, contributing to a political culture of legitimacy outside formal democratic mechanisms (Ahmad, 1964; Zaman, 2002). This legacy of street-based mobilization provided an important historical antecedent to contemporary forms of mass agitation, including the emergence of highly mobilized protest movements in the digital age.

As we have mentioned above, impiety accusations were not significant political weapons during this period. The relevant provisions under Sections 295–298 of the Indian Penal Code (carried over into Pakistan's Penal Code) were infrequently applied and mainly existed to serve as communal harmony laws between Muslims and minorities (Siddique & Hayat, 2008; Newberg, 1995). The lack of political use of these legal instruments was reflected in legal records (Kennedy, 1992). Communal disputes were otherwise resolved on an informal or civil litigation basis. The state had not yet embraced or used dogmatic sensitivities as a tool of control

or legitimacy. Even the 1974 categorization of Ahmadis as non-Muslims was not proof of a deeply rooted tradition of state-sponsored performative piety. Instead, it was the result of a conjuncture of populist pressures, street agitation, and PM Bhutto's political weakness in the aftermath of the post-1971 secession of East Pakistan. The anti-Ahmadi movement had been brewing since the riots of 1953, when fundamentalist parties called for this sect to be legally proclaimed non-Muslims (Munir Report, 1954). Successive governments like those of Liaquat Ali Khan and Ayub Khan had ignored these demands in fear of the destabilizing effect it would have on sectarian harmony (Binder, 1961; Nasr, 2001).

By 1974 the trauma of Bangladesh's partition had eroded the ideological underpinning of "Muslim unity" as the foundation of Pakistani nationalism. During this vulnerable period, opposition forces including Jamaat-e-Islami organized often violent street protests against Ahmadis as an affront to Islamic identity (Qasmi, 2014). Bhutto, under criticism for autocratic inclinations and economic unrest, yielded to the protestors hoping to defuse opposition pressure and solidify his own credentials (Zaman, 2018). The move, though symbolic, was actually reactive and instrumental in nature. It was not based on a deep-seated habit of performative piety by the state but on short-term survival. Bhutto, frequently referred to as a secular populist who identified with socialism and modernization, had earlier withstood clerical control of state policy. But in this hour of need, he employed faith as an instrument of political capital more than as a strategy of involving in activities of spirituality (Talbot, 2000; Jalal, 1995).

The "front-stage" of Pakistani political performance prior to General Zia comprised nationalist-modernist narratives that used dogma as a backdrop factor without making it the central issue of their performances. During their public performances, leaders portrayed themselves as rational individuals looking for social change (Lieven, 2011). Pakistani media, under the control of Ayub Khan and subsequent dictator Yahya Khan emphasized scientific progress and nationalism along with global diplomacy rather than televising prayer shows (Ahmed, 1983; Schoemaker, 2016).

Departing from the front-stage, the back-stage arena did have discourse against separation of the proverbial church and state but was confined to clerical circles and private institutions. The institutional mechanisms that allowed for extremist state policies that were installed by General Zia ul-Haq did not yet exist. Researchers have widely explored how authorities made various dogmatic laws into institutionalized political tools. Kennedy (1992) asserted that these laws began to function as such instruments following General Zia's time which allowed fundamentalists to use them for political exploitation. Asad (2003) explained how faith-based accusations in post-colonial Muslim states such as Pakistan became not just legal or theological issues, but also extensively connected with identity and power politics. Jahangir and Chakma (2009) examined the psychological and legal implications that these legislations had along with their effects on religious minorities. From identifying documented instances of extrajudicial killings coupled with mob violence and widespread legal harassment, this study illustrated how dogmatically coded legislative acts could become tools for political and personal revenge.

### Discourse analysis

In the 1974 Lahore summit, Bhutto stated: "*We are not gathered here to impose any ideology on others, but to cooperate as sovereign nations for the progress and welfare of our peoples*" (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Address at the Second Islamic Summit Conference, Lahore Summit, Lahore, Pakistan, February 22–24, 1974).

The Lahore Summit was an essential diplomatic initiative that took place to enhance friendly relations with Muslim states (Hyder, 1972). This was the second Islamic summit conference which was hosted for a mix of strategic reasons (Hyder, 1972). It was started under

Bhutto's regime, wherein he framed it as a part of a broader vision to showcase Islamic solidarity in the world (Hyder, 1972). This speech reflects aspirations of sovereignty and cooperation Bhutto aimed for rather than focusing on scriptural values as the sole basis of state legitimacy (Hyder, 1972).

### Front-stage analysis

Bhutto performed the role of modernizing the debate around state and religion. He used inclusive language such as "cooperate" to develop a system of collaboration, which played well with an international audience. The word "welfare" worked towards establishing a non-religious aspect to his goals. Thus, his take was the use of progressive movement to legitimize the state's power. The reason behind the usage of secular and non-secular driven wording was because he wanted Pakistan to move and position itself as a leader of the Muslim world and to build a third bloc in the realm of global politics. Especially in the backdrop of the Cold War his words about progress and welfare for "our peoples" denotes a larger goal to display a unified projected strength of the Muslim states. By creating a third bloc, these states could have formed a powerful and economically stable entity.

### Back-stage analysis

Pakistan still required legitimacy as it was a nascent state, thus the Muslim leadership had to be involved strategically. Bhutto balanced the stance by using state pragmatism with economic cooperation as well as foreign policy interests. This controlled the use of religion and attained ideological commitment. Moreover, after the 1971 breakup of Pakistan, this was an essential summit wherein the dogmatic sentiments were used in a secular fashion. The country required re-branding which Bhutto attempted via diplomacy. He made strategic use of religion that brought Muslim world leaders together but did not use it to amalgamate state with religion.

### Analysis using Pakistan's case study for performativity and identity formation

During this time-period, Pakistan's patronage networks functioned mostly beyond the orbit of performative faith, depending instead on bureaucratic power, kinship relationships, and feudal bonds to underwrite political legitimacy (Alavi, 1972; Waseem, 1994). Orthodoxy was symbolically significant, articulated most importantly in the Objectives Resolution of 1949, but it was used more as a rhetorical tool than as an institutionalized practice of political piety (Binder, 1961; Burki, 1986). Leaders like Liaquat Ali Khan and Ayub Khan focused on developmental modernism and nationalism, projecting themselves as secular administrators and not religious performers (Weiss, 1986; Esposito, 1998). Fait community parties like Jamaat-e-Islami were politically peripheral, gaining some influence only at the times of agitation like the 1953 anti-Ahmadi riots, but without institutionalized patronage or systemized reward for public demonstration of devoutness (Qasmi, 2014; Zaman, 2002). Even when faith emerged in the political sphere, it was transient and responsive, and not a front-stage show heralded by state power (Goffman, 1959; Lieven, 2011).

The 1974 constitutional amendment to label Ahmadis as non-Muslims exemplifies this reactive nature of faith in politics. It was not based on a history of state-inspired piety but, instead, a political compromise to rising street pressure in a time of national weakness after the loss of East Pakistan (Munir Report, 1954; Qasmi, 2014; Zaman, 2018). Bhutto, who was accused of authoritarianism and economic missteps, used theological tools for legitimacy thereby codifying anti-Ahmadi sentiment (Talbot, 2000; Jalal, 1995). This was not an exercise of sustained performative pietism but an exercise in political survival tactics, supporting of Talal Asad's (2003) claim that dogmatic categorization within postcolonial states is an exercise in sovereign authority assertion. Although radically significant, these events did not yet position

of divinity at the center of Pakistan's political drama but rather paved the way for more institutionalized and performative devoutness to come under General Zia-ul-Haq.

### **Time-period 2: During Zia's regime (1977-1988)**

During the pre-Zia period, faith served mainly as a symbolic variable, evoked discursively in times of crisis but not translated into everyday political practice. This lack of front-stage devoutness highlights the break that Zia's policies would subsequently create, converting theology into an institutionalized spectacle of power from a reactive political resource.

As mentioned before, the Zia regime (1977-1988) introduced radical doctrinal laws. The Hudood Ordinance (1979) included the Offence of Zina, within which section 4 ended up defining what adultery meant. Section 5 was based on hadd (punishments), which included stoning (Bukhsh, 2024). To be able to practice hadd, there was a need to attain four adult Muslim male as witnesses, while false accusation of Zina was banned under Qazf Ordinance Sec 3 and 5 (Hashmi, 2025). Other laws related to violation of faith were amended under Sec 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (Arif, Ali, & Asfaham, 2022) leading to life imprisonment. Additionally, the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance was institutionalized, creating a system of Islamic taxation that exists even today (Arif, Ali, & Asfaham, 2022). These legal reforms presented an effort to create doctrinal changes within the state, but these had far-reaching consequences, especially for women (Alam, Bibi, & Khatwani, 2023).

#### Discourse analysis

General Zia is quoted to have said, "*Pakistan, which was created in the name of Islam, will continue to survive only if it sticks to Islam*" (Ziring, 1997).

This was part of a speech by General Zia during his first televised address after taking power. He was talking about the enforcement of clerical laws within Pakistan and making it a necessary step codify religion into statecraft. This statement was made to tie Pakistan's existence and survival to its ability to be non-secular. General Zia was equating dogma with not just one aspect of the state but the defining condition of legitimacy. The assertion also contended that Pakistan existed solely because of dogmatic reasons. This is known as temporal reconstruction wherein one rewrites the past to the control the present. This also limited patriotism performativity to agreeing with his views.

#### Front-stage analysis

The front-stage performance by General Zia was based on proving himself as the guardian of the state's faith-based identity. He legitimized his power through equating duty towards faith with patriotism. The use of the word "duty" signified his move towards actually accepting the power to bring back reverence into statehood. He linked this to the idea of Pakistan and the reason for partition. Where a separate homeland was promised based on clerical duties. This gave him moral authority to rule through the usage of holiness. The 1971 partition and then the Afghan War in 1979 required theology to develop a sense of unity among the people of Pakistan. Thus, sacred sentiments were employed to enhance collectivism within Pakistani society. His words had a tone of inevitability and certainty, which removed any sort of ambiguity attached to radicalization or its connection to Pakistan; "*will continue to survive only...*" Lastly, an emotional appeal was generated out of this statement.

#### Back-stage analysis

General Zia had attained power through a military coup in the year 1977. This meant that he had to legitimize his power among the masses. Thus, he used religious discourse to legitimize his rule. Doctrinal policies helped him retain power while securing political support

by using performances of devoutness as a strategic tool. By linking faith to patriotism, dissent against the state was woven into impiety. His above statement narrowed acceptable state identity to a theocratic one which was continuously regulated and conditional. This paved the way for policy enforcement. The backstage performance was based on supporting his military coup by using doctrinal values to legitimize it. Consequently, legal and institutional engineering legislation and establishing doctrinal courts further cemented these constructs (Arif, Ali, & Asfaham, 2022).

#### Dramaturgical analysis using Pakistan's case study

By applying dramaturgical analysis to Zia-ul-haq's doctrinal regime, we inferred significant divergence between the front and back-stages. The front-stage performances claimed a moral right to rule and reform. These included social reformation measures like 2.5% of zakat compulsory on citizens who could afford it (Din, 2014). Zakat is a fixed amount that is deducted on accumulated wealth within a year and given to the poor (Din, 2014). These were introduced through the banking system and formalized at the front-stage as way of ensuring General Zia's publicly pious image. Pakistan's television channel had presenters showing imagery and dressing in religiously conservative clothing (Jafar, 2005) Mosque construction increased significantly while Fridays were declared as public holiday (Jafar, 2005). While such performances made up the front-stage, the back-stage was vastly different. Pakistan became an autocratic military regime (Bhatti et al, 2025). There was significant increase in authoritarianism and dissent was not tolerated as illustrated by the execution of political opponent Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Press censorship increased, with Press and Publications Ordinance, where several journalists were imprisoned (Bhatti et al, 2025). The regime was patriarchal with nearly 70 to 80% of those imprisoned under zina-related charges being women. Mostly because they were unable to bring forward four witnesses to prove rape (Zia, 2009). Via the doctrinal control laws that restricted violations, falsely accusations increased (Khalid, 2025). Madrassa (a madrassa is a religious school) numbers also increased significantly, from a few hundred to thousands by late 1980s, while the Soviet war was funding the Kalashnikov culture, and preparing the Mujahideen (Khalid, 2025).

#### Consequences of Zia's rule

From 1988, till 2010, discourse developed and changed at the same time. The state initially made use of faith-based laws, while there were certain shifts made towards secularism at the same time. For example, Benazir Bhutto as the first female prime minister of an Islamic state implemented laws that empowered women, such as first female led banking (Weiss, 1990). However, several of General Zia's policies were institutionalized into state structure. Politicians performed pietism but became more selective about it (Zia, 2019). The performances became more strategic. Politicians like Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto were introducing secular as well as religious laws at the same time, thus there existed a dichotomy within their policies (Zia, 2019). Leaders started blending Islamic references with democratic language to engage with the audience. Nawaz Sharif ended up pushing for Sharia based governance in the year 1991 (Zia, 2019). Sharia refers to Islamic laws and moral guidance. Parties used it to gain voter support and counter the opponents.

#### **Time-period 3: Post Zia's regime (2010-present)**

Since the post-Zia era, especially over the past two decades, the rise and spread of digital technologies have had a profound impact on the landscape of religious performance and the nature of violation of normative sensitivities. According to Murthy and Longwell (2013), the 2010 floods in Pakistan prompted many Pakistani to express their views on Twitter (now called X). Similarly, the use of this platform during Sweden's 2010 elections made many Pakistanis

realize the political implications of social media (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Therefore, this time-period was chosen from 2010 onwards.

Digital spaces have given rise to “hybrid public spheres” (Qadir, 2019) where physical and virtual spaces overlap, producing arenas for performative pietism, resistance, and algorithmically fueled amplification. Social media platforms (X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok) are now essential sites for the enactment of identity performativity. Gillespie (2018) points out that these sites favor content through algorithms that bestow reward on emotional experience and the promise of going viral. In Pakistan, religious content such as the exhibitions of public pietism or accusations of doctrinal violations often goes viral with the help of the outrage economy and shared faith-based emotions (Montpellier, 2023). Political actors consequently employ social media symbolism and dogmatic references to legitimize their policies and leadership image (Schoemaker, 2016).

Marginalized minorities be they of the different faiths of denominations alongside secular and progressive elements, are more vulnerable in cyberspace. Hate speech and cyber vigilantism are common, especially where the above groups share dissenting opinions on theology or politics. Jahangir and Chakma (2009) observe that the legal apparatus tends to neglect these individuals, while online platforms have no localized content moderation systems to ward off harm. Moreover, feminist and LGBTQ+ activists are also routinely branded as enemies of the faith, especially during public demonstrations like the ones conducted on International Women's day. Online, these accusations are amplified through hashtags and trending posts that call for arrest or even violence. This trend mirrors what Bano (2009) and Shaheed (2010) term a gendered aspect of religious performativity in which policing morality online reaffirms patriarchal dogmatic norms.

Digital platforms have also brought intricate dynamics to intergenerational relationships. While older generations tend to cohere with established, state-authorized religious discourse, young users involve themselves in world discourses, challenging established norms and employing online spaces for critique (Boyd, 2011). This has generated tension, especially when youth challenge dominant doctrinal narratives or push for pluralism. Jibran Nasir, a Karachi-based lawyer and activist at the Digital Rights Foundation, among others, utilizes social media to decry the abuse of doctrinal laws, campaign for human rights, and monitor instances of religious persecution (India Today, 2018). These “back-stage” digital performances counter the front-stage religious spectacle, exposing contradictions and suggesting alternative discourses.

### Discourse analysis

We used two different examples of discourse, one based on online content, and one based on physical performance.

Physical Discourse Analysis (excerpts from Ali Muhammad Khan of PTI's speech (“PTI Is Once Again”, 2022)): “*This resolution has broken the backs of the Qadianis*”.

In this line, Ali Muhammad Khan was explaining to the crowd during his speech that the National Assembly had adopted a resolution that was against the interests of the Ahmadi minority sect. He used the term Qaidiani which is seen as a slur to Ahmadis because it associates them with Qadian, an area in India rather than Ahmadi, a follower of Muhammad (Khan, 2022). To celebrate the proverbial breaking of the backs of the Ahmadis with a crowd while also making use of violent imagery shows the performance is intended to win favor with the religious vote base and encourage hate and even violence.

The article further quoted another politician aligned with the government at the time, Sheikh Rasheed who said Lahore was a “*fortress of Khatam-e-Nabuwat*” (“PTI Is Once Again”, 2022). This term is about the mainstream Muslim belief that there is prophet after Muhammad,

but it challenges the claim Ahmadis have of being Muslim (Kamran, 2019). Rasheed went on to praise the Majlis-e-Ahrar during this performance. The Majlis-e-Ahrar is an extremist organization that was responsible for the deaths of many Ahmadis (Kamran, 2016). This performance again reflects how political actors capitalized on hate to curry favor with their electorates. The state's official anti-Ahmadi position gave cover to these attacks; in effect these performances were patronage to the state's position on the subject.

### Front-stage analysis

At the front-stage, Ali Muhammad Khan became a defender of the dominant exclusionary values by using the phrase "*this resolution has broken the backs of the Qadianis*". Moreover, to please the dominant audience, his performance legitimized the state's stance framing it as decisive and a moral imperative. This was conducted as a symbol of piety, and the performance became a symbolic display of moral authority.

### Back stage analysis

This speech reflected strategic political positioning where religious rhetoric was used to solidify support and retain relevancy within the political landscape. Consequently, this had a severe impact on the marginalized group; as it was targeting and as a tool for boundary-making and establishing an identity of us vs them. This redirected public attention towards identity politics once again.

Online Discourse Analysis – the Supreme Court of Pakistan (2018): "*It is a cardinal principle of law that benefit of doubt must be extended to the accused*". When Asia Bibi was acquitted in the year 2018 the social media became a hub of comments and reactions. This included several politicians and religious figures reprimanding the act of acquittal. There were intense debates on religion and justice, while state authority was brought into question (Ahmed, 2020)

### Front-stage analysis

The online performance showed many framing their posts as defending Islam. They were seen using religious references and moral claims to establish their point. While the others showed a different stance, stating that justice and rule of law should be the basis of judgements. Two different stances were seen, where some supported the state's decision of acquittal and stood with state's independence in taking decisions. While clerics stood against it, stating that state with theology was weak and should rely on doctrinal values to grow, thus they disagreed with the decision of going ahead with acquitting Asia Bibi.

### Back-stage analysis

The back-stage performance might have been different as users may have tweaked their replies based on the backlash they might have received on their comments that they made. Coordinated messaging strategies by several actors to shape narratives were employed and mobilized supporters.

## **Conclusion**

General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–1988) is a watershed in the history of Pakistan as it signified a change of statecraft; the instrumental use of orthodoxy had new visibility in public domain. Performance-religiosity under Zia moved from the periphery of political performance to the center. General Zia institutionalized the theatre of piety and such gestures as collection of compulsory zakat, state-supported Ramadan transmissions, and public flogging under the Hudood Ordinances (Ziring, 1988; Haqqani, 2005). Doctrinal laws were broadened through the

Section 295-B and 295-C, in which offences against the faith were punishable with stronger sentences including the death sentence (Siddique & Hayat, 2008).

In the post-Zia period, secular political parties embraced pietism performances in order to assert their legitimacy and challenge opponents. Nawaz Sharif's PML-N made use of doctrinal metaphors, bolstered madrasas, and enacted laws compatible with conservative faith-based beliefs (Rizvi, 2000). PTI, led by Imran Khan, drew upon both modern and doctrinal imagery, and frequently referred to "Medina ki Riyasat" (the State of Medina) as an ideal to aspire for (Schoemaker 2016). Moreover, the in 2017 massive protests shook the PML-N government over a small language tweak in the electoral oath regarding Ahmadis showed clearly just how deeply performative faith had become cemented in electoral and discursive strategy (Amir Rana, 2018).

Doctrinal offences and performativity not only negatively impact religious minorities but also secular/progressive Muslims. Often they are charged based on flimsy grounds, attacked by angry mobs or arrested and taken to court (Jahangir & Chakma 2009). The digitally native generation has found itself exposed to global digital cultures but also force-fed the national narratives that value faith-based homogeneity. This dichotomy has led to more intergenerational tensions as young people negotiate between handed-down expectations of religious devotion and the digital and online spaces of identity-formation (Mahmood 2009; Schoemaker 2016).

Our research found that faith-based offences within Pakistan functioned as instruments and tools of state sovereignty, social control, as well as identity performance, while the emergence of digital media intensified both hegemonic spiritual narratives and counter-narratives, with a major impact on shaping youth identities. These dynamics highlighted the imperative for reforms that struck a balance between respecting doctrinal sentiment and the protection of minority rights. This study had theoretically unpacked the intersection of faith-based offences, performative doctrines, and patronage in Pakistan's socio-political evolution, using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis. We established that the change initiated under Zia-ul-Haq's regime remapped the political landscape of the nation by institutionalizing public piety and rendering performance a part of statecraft. Charges of faith-based offence, both on and offline, have functioned not only as weapons of moral restraint but as conscious performances of sovereignty, legitimacy, and dominance.

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