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Laughter as Means of Politics in Pakistan: A Discourse Study

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Abstract

Negative attitudes and prejudices can be conveyed and expressed through indirect channels by means of jokes (Allport, 1954; Freud, 2004). The current paper is aimed at studying the political jokes of the selected Pakistani politicians which are spread through the social media to portray their political opponents as inferior, small, contemptible and amusing. Sigmund Freud, author of the book 'Jokes and their relations to unconsciousness', argues in 1960 that political regimes, their leaders and their policies are targets of the jokes. Freud even goes ahead to say that such jokes are made on the leaders and are the weapons that are wielded by people because of the unequal balance of power relations. The present study adopts the approach proposed by Freud who classifies jokes into obscene jokes that are made for the purpose of exposure and hostile jokes that are used for purposes of aggression and satire in order to make one's rival appear inferior and disgraceful. Moreover, Ruskin (1985) classifies humor into three categories: a) sexual humor; b) ethnic humor; and c) political humor. From the findings of the research, it can be seen that the jokes circulating on social media serve the purpose of politics in Pakistan. Non-violent political activists belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League N (PMLN) and Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) use humor against their opponents who they perceive as being more powerful and the jokes serve as a way to put the opponent political groups or leaders to shame because both of these political groups are diametrically opposed to each other.

Keywords: Laughter, Politics, Leaders, Pakistan, Linguistics

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Introduction

Humour is deployed by the non-violent political activists and organizations to put the other group in their place, who they view as being more powerful than them, which makes jokes a medium of putting the opposite political group or the leader in question into a position of being looked at as inferior or disgraceful. This aroused our interest as a researcher when the two leading political parties in Pakistan, Pakistan Muslim League N (PMLN) and Pakistan Tehreek-i-insaaf(PTI), are usually on the verge of having a major political conflict and other political leaders in general. Some political jokes used by both the political parties are based on reason and logic while having taken an indirect approach to do so, but others have more appeal to emotions and truths in the world.

Jokes about politics are an important element of Pakistani culture. Jokes are cracked about wife, molvi (clergyman), political leaders, and also about ethnic groups like Pathan, Punjabi, Baloch and so on. These jokes can be found at government offices where government officials are killing their time, at local coffeehouses, among friends, and even in homes of millions of Pakistanis.

Freud in his book titled "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" discusses specifically the motivations behind jokes. According to him, there are two kinds of jokes namely a) jokes with motivation (tendentious) and b) jokes without any specific motivation. Further, he claims that a joke is not an end in itself and there are only two ends to which jokes may be applied: 1) Either a joke is aggressive (motivated by aggressiveness, satire or defence), or 2) a joke is obscene (motivated by exposure) and political regimes, leaders and their policies serve as the object of inherent aggressiveness of the joke.

Laughter has great power when sugar coated. Political humor is indeed a form of catharsis since it permits one to conquer one's oppressors for a short while by means of mockery and criticism of individuals who could not have been mocked or criticized in

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any other way. While political jokes can't bring down oppressive regimes, they can at least offer some consolation from their oppression.

There are several factors that make the joke especially appropriate for use in situations of political repression. Firstly, the joke is an oral form of humor, thus censorship turns out to be impossible. Secondly, being an impersonal kind of communication, the joke itself does not involve personal responsibility from the joke-teller who is only the medium of transmission in such case.

Literature Review

The scientific study of political jokes and humor has its origins in the psychoanalytic and linguistic theories of how laughter acts as a tool of power negotiation. Freud (1960) showed that jokes do not generally function in an unbiased manner, but instead they are either non-tendentious or abstract jokes, and tendentious jokes can be further divided into hostile or satirical/aggressive jokes and obscene or exposure jokes. Tendentious jokes act as socially acceptable channels through which latent aggression can be channelled towards authorities operating in oppressive power hierarchies (Freud, 1960; Kuipers, 2015).

Raskin's (1985) extension of structure-based humor taxonomy identified humor as operating within specific realms of life, including sexual, ethnic, and political, with an emphasis on shared scripts facilitating the use of codes for subversiveness. In modern politics, such theoretical postulates are still relevant because laughter becomes the form of catharsis for the "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1990), which allows people to deal with power imbalances while challenging existing regimes without punishment from the state (Billig, 2005; Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

The emergence of technology has enabled political satire to move from its folkloric oral roots to online viral memes. According to Shifman (2014), the memes serve as dense units of political discourse that help in democratizing politics by making the failures of the governance process easy-to-consume cultural products. Humor on the Internet has

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become the most common platform for ideological debate in the socio-political context of South Asia and Pakistan (Chiluwa & Samo, 2019; Khan et al., 2021).

Nonviolent political activists utilize digital humor, which is not only for fun but serves as an aggressive strategy to ridicule their political adversaries and demystify the charisma of elites and voice socio-economic apprehension prevailing within society (Tayyab & Aslam, 2020; Zia & Malik, 2022). Therefore, internet jokes in Pakistan become a battlefield where competing political groups such as PTI and PML-N supporters engage in political battle.

For an analysis of the construction of meaning by means of political jokes, one must deconstruct the linguistic mechanisms behind the jokes themselves. In his General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), Attardo (1994, 2001) focuses on incongruity resolution, which occurs when humor is created by suddenly contrasting two opposing semantic scripts—such as comparing sacred religious rhetoric to low-brow political insults. For a connection between these micro-linguistic concepts and macro-level power dynamics, CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) proves to be quite useful. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model analyzes discourse in three dimensions that interconnect: the text, the process of discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice.

As a supplement to general CDA theories, Wodak (2001, 2009, 2015)'s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) points out that it is impossible to comprehend political discourse without considering the historical and socio-political environment in which it operates. DHA involves concepts like topoi (argumentative shortcuts) and self-positive versus other-negative presentations to show how historical background, such as civil-military conflicts, political exile, and judicial disqualification in Pakistan, gets recontextualized using satire (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

In addition to this, experts have highlighted how political humor often overlaps with the socio-cultural hierarchy embedded in society, through the use of gendered stereotypes or ethnic/ regional stereotypes such as Pathan jokes, which makes political criticism socially

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acceptable (Weaver, 2011; Kuipers, 2015). It has been made evident through the fusion of Freudian functions, linguistic incongruity by Attardo, and the critical approach of Fairclough and Wodak that political humor in Pakistan serves two purposes at once, that of popular resistance and a reflection of social prejudice.

Methodology

In this qualitative research study, a critical linguistic approach is used to explore political humor and memes produced by the followers of the mainstream political parties in Pakistan, including the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in specific and other political leaders in general. The main data set for this research consists of specifically selected multimodal, textual, and visual political jokes and memes from Facebook pages like “Siyasilafafa” targeting important political personalities and socio-political events taking place in Pakistan. The main aim of the data collection was to gather examples of controversial political humor that is shared across party lines. It is important to note that the main selection criteria for the data selection were explicit linguistic incongruities, sacred/secular juxtapositions, gender/ethnic stereotypes, and satirical commentaries on political power, exile, and elections.

An integrated multi-theoretical framework was used to analyze the data in order to deconstruct power relations, ideology, and socio-political functions of these jokes. At the micro-linguistic level, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Salvatore Attardo (1994, 2001) was employed to understand the processes of resolution of incongruity and script opposition. The micro-level textual properties were combined with the macro-level discourse analysis theories represented by the Three-Dimensional Model of Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995) (analyzing text, discursive practice, and social practice) and Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of Ruth Wodak (2001, 2009). Additionally, the typology of tendentious jokes by Sigmund Freud (1960) (hostile and obscene) and the taxonomy of humor by Victor Raskin (1985) were operationalized to

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show the use of satire as a hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) by political agents as a form of aggression and catharsis to contest dominant power structures.

Analysis

Image-1:



The political meme provides a critique of political rhetoric in populist politics in Pakistan through the use of humor through irony and linguistic incongruity to highlight the conflict between the use of sacred frames and political hostilities. Depicting a picture of Imran Khan together with laughing emojis and digital watermarks, the text of the meme means: "Imran Khan is that 'azeem leader' whose speech begins with 'You alone we worship and You alone we ask for help [Quran 1:5] and ends with hurling abuses at his political opponents". In this political meme, the source of humor has been explained using the theory of incongruity by Attardo. The joke has been made possible due to the moral dissonance between the start of the speech by mentioning Surah Al-Fatiha, which is a classic method of legitimization of the ethno-political group through piety, and ending it through ad verbal attacks.

In the wider context of Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough and Wodak, the digital artifact represents how popular political satire constitutes a subversive counter-discourse

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that operates against institutionalized power. Generated on social media pages like SiyasiLatifay, such memes enable citizens to demystify political charisma, transgress linguistic conventions, and uncover institutional hypocrisy through political satire of small proportions. Some of the key theoretical concepts that can be used in applying this meme within an academic study include Salvatore Attardo's Linguistic Theories of Humor (1994), which can be useful for the analysis of incongruities, Norman Fairclough's Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research (2003), which will be helpful in deconstructing power and ideologies in texts, Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa's Studies in Political Humor (2011) for critiquing satirical discourse, and Ruth Wodak's The Politics of Fear (2015).

Image-2:



The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework by Norman Fairclough helps understand the visual image in terms of the tripartite model of text, discourse practice and social practice in order to reveal the power dynamics that lie in the context of Pakistani socio-political humor. First, the dialogue uses tropes that are familiar to the domestic realm: the woman says "Aap mujhe talaq de bhi dein toh mein phir bhi ghar ke darwaze par baithi rahungi... magar aap se dur nahin jaungi" (Even if you divorce me, I will still sit at the door of the house... but I won't go away from you), while the man retorts "Zanani ban, Nawaz Sharif na ban" (Be a woman, don't be Nawaz Sharif). At the micro-level of linguistic choice (Fairclough, 1992), the joke lies in the satire of substituting political tenacity with marital stubbornness.

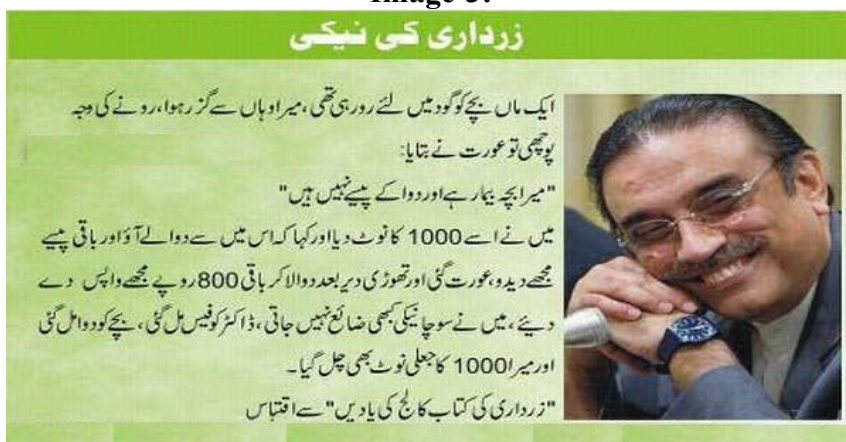
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Discourse, according to Fairclough, is both socially constructed and socially constructive; in the case of this joke, the text captures the sociopolitical environment of Pakistan, where "Nawaz Sharif's" return, exile, and reluctance to quit politics, regardless of disqualification or political pressures, have been a major issue of interest in the country. In this case, an attempt at reproducing the issue of an important political figure's reluctance to step aside through dependency is a form of political satire.

In this analysis, using Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) framework, political joke works through the incorporation of historical context, intertextuality, and sociopolitical commentary to capture the hidden ideology. According to Wodak (2001, 2009), the study of discourse cannot be undertaken independent of the socio-historical contexts of discourse.

The humor also uses gendered stereotypes by likening political clout with the nagging or subordinate spouse ("Zanani"). This is indicative of how hegemonic ideological discourses construct political adversaries through gendered language. As humor scholars Tsakona and Popa (2011) observe, political humor offers a subversive way of criticism where political actors may safely use jokes to negotiate political power disparities. In the larger context of Pakistani digital social practices, the meme is used as a tool for political commentary, where political cynicism is normalized in terms of domestic humor.

Image-3:



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According to Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the satirical picture Zardari ki Neki ("Zardari's Good Deed") is produced in the context of text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). In the context of the textual dimension, the meme creates irony through language by presenting a combination of morally-loaded words like neki (good deed) and an altruistic message, followed by the punch line exposing a premeditated act of deception through the means of a fake bank note ("میرا 1000 کا جعلی نوٹ بھی چل گیا"). Creating a fabricated citation of the story as told in the non-existing book *College Memories*, the meme creates an illusion of authentic autobiography, thus adding to its satire. In the discursive dimension, the text employs intertextual consumption, when Pakistani citizens use their knowledge of politics.

As a result of portraying the process of exploitation by society as a benevolent act of charity, the joke becomes a communicative device which allows average people to criticize the political agenda by means of humor (Attardo, 2001; Tsakona & Popa, 2011). The structural elements of the joke create a clear asymmetry of power between the powerless and vulnerable mother and the elite member who gains from the situation even when seemingly providing assistance. The application of the rhetorical device of hypocrisy in this case leads to the undermining of the political legitimacy of the elite by showing how ruling classes take advantage of people's weakness through state or individual benevolence. This is how political humor works as an essential tool of resistance in Pakistani civil society.

In the context of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), the present case of the use of humor should be analyzed based on the context of corruption within the elites and cynicism among the masses with regard to the politicians leading the government in Pakistan (Wodak, 2001, 2009). The multimodal element here includes the image of the grinning Zardari with his hands on his face, which serves as an example of the linguistic representation of the indifferent attitude of a politician to the socio-economic troubles of the common man (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

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Image-4:

استاد: بتاؤ یہ کون سا زمانہ ہے؟
میں رو رہا ہوں، تم رو رہے ہو سب رو رہے ہیں
پٹھان: یہ تو ن لیگ کا زمانہ لگ رہا ہے۔

This particular joke involves a dialogue between a teacher, referred to as “Ustad,” and a student who is supposed to be a Pathan, at the intersection of linguistic form and power relations. Within the framework of three-dimensional approach to CDA propounded by Norman Fairclough, the textual dimension is based on the grammatical play on the word Zamana in Urdu (which means tense and era). While the teacher wants to give a lecture about grammatical tenses, "I am crying, you are crying, everyone is crying," the student views Zamana in sociopolitical context as an epoch "the era of the [Pakistan Muslim] League." According to Fairclough, discourse mirrors social reality and at the same time produces it. In this case, humor is used as discourse practice using grammar as a weapon of poverty and governance failure.

In addition to this, the clear ethnic identification of the interviewee with the label "Pathan," accompanied by the use of unconventional grammatical expressions like "ho rahe hai" and "sab roor hai," falls within the purview of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), elaborated by Ruth Wodak. Wodak has pointed out the role of stereotypes and identity construction in discourse, and here the political critique is done in a stereotyped form of identity, thereby using the method of othering.

On a macro socio-cultural perspective, the political humor is seen as a "hidden transcript," which allows people to voice their opposition to state repression and socio-economic suffering through subversive laughter. As per Wodak, the context re-contextualization of "crying" in the text is indicative of the collective suffering of the masses and this suffering is linked to the ruling classes (Muslim League). The work of Norman Fairclough points out that power relations are ideologically motivated and

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discursively negotiated; hence, by taking an institutional dialogue about a classroom scenario and turning it into a critique of politics, the text shows how the political satire deconstructs the hegemony of the dominant class. Laughter is an ideological tool that defuses political tensions; thus, the masses can confront the political power structures even while reproducing the social linguistic hierarchy of the region within Pakistani mainstream politics.

Image-5:



Examining the image using the model of Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough and the Discourse Historical Approach by Ruth Wodak, the image shows the juxtaposition of Imran Khan (head of PTI) with the use of a satirized internal monologue: "Even after banning Nawaz Sharif, our success cannot happen as we will have to ban the voters who vote for N-League." According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is defined as a social practice that has a dialectical relationship with social structure and exists as text, discursive practice, and social practice. In this case, the discourse is constructed using humor and irony, where there is an implicit power struggle indicating that success can only be achieved by banning the electorate.

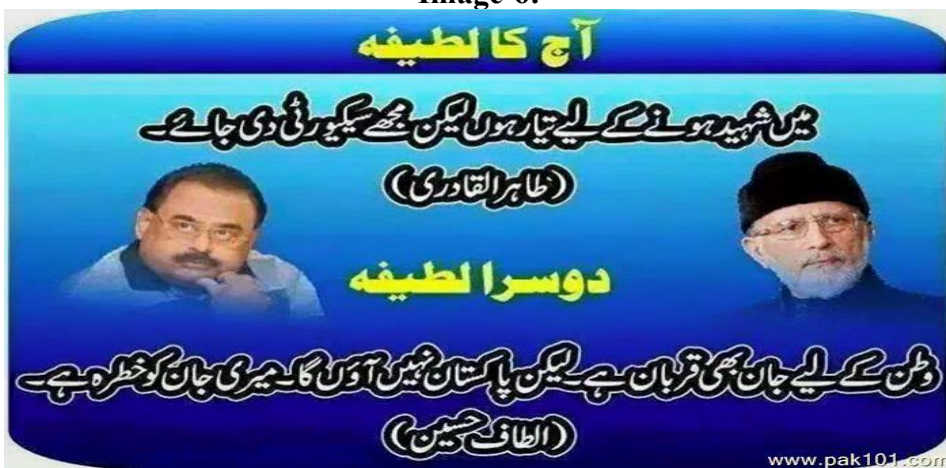
According to Wodak (2001, 2009), the discourse is based on historical context, more precisely the socio-political context that keeps recurring in Pakistan in relation to political

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engineering, judicial disqualification, and the rigging of elections. The meme uses a "top-down" subversive approach (Tsakona & Popa, 2011), using political humor to expose power relations and political narratives through revealing the anxiety of the political elite about the popular vote bank.

On the level of socio-political practice, the image becomes an ideological critique that corresponds to the theoretical standpoint of Wodak concerning the construction of identities and power through the positive self-representation of discourse and negative other-representation (us vs. them). Using the satirical text and juxtaposing it with Imran Khan, the author uses the technique of satirical subversion, which is a term that is underlined in the works of Attardo (2014) and Milner (2013) on political humor. The use of laugh emojis visualizes the placement of the text in the context of meme culture in social media and turns sophisticated political cynicism into the shareable form of political engagement (Shifman, 2014). In relation to the political discourse in Pakistan, the joke can be considered as a counter-discourse that rejects the hegemonic discourse of institutions by turning political strategy into the strategy of disenfranchisement of democracy.

Image-6:



By means of Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this political meme acts as a discursive practice that both reproduces

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and contests political power of elites through humor. On the text level, the meme makes use of language irony and contradiction in Urdu to challenge the authority of two notable Pakistani political leaders: Tahir-ul-Qadri ("I am willing to become a martyr, but I must be given security") and Altaf Hussain ("I am willing to sacrifice my life for the country, but I won't come to Pakistan because my life is in danger"). According to Norman Fairclough, discourse is not a mere reflection of social reality but a social practice itself. By putting forward such nationalistic terminology (shaheed, watan) in conjunction with self-preserving conditions, the text achieves deconstruction of the political rhetoric used by politicians who claim to be leaders through such hypocritical methods. From a practice of discourse perspective, the consumption of this meme is possible as a result of knowledge shared by common people regarding the self-exile of these personalities along with their high security. As discussed by Teun A. van Dijk, one of the founding scholars of discourse and power, elite actors exercise their dominance through their access to public discourse, but digital political humor acts as a counter-discourse to this power of elites.

By utilizing the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) proposed by Ruth Wodak, the focus moves on to the historical dimension of political satire in Pakistan. The latter emphasizes the importance of analyzing discourse against the historical conditions and socio-political background of its production. In terms of historical contextualization, the analysis of these two figures becomes relevant. Qadri leads the marches against the government and, at the same time, calls upon it to provide him with security. Similarly, Hussain directs his political movement in Karachi from his place of exile in London.

It is these historical contexts that constitute the necessary background, without which this meme would not have been subversive. By using the concept of "topoi" or argumentative shortcuts by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, one should note that in this case the topoi of hypocrisy is used to question the legitimacy of political leadership and moral superiority of political figures. Ruth Wodak highlights how politicians engage in

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construction of self-presentation ("us") and counter-presentation ("them"). In the process of public discourse, however, the joke deconstructs the heroic "hero-patriot" identity that these politicians try to construct and shows that their political stance is paradoxical and absurd.

Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical findings show the way digital political humor acts as the weapon of ideology and the space for counter-discourse in the highly polarized political environment in Pakistan. Using Freud's theory on the subject of tendentious jokes and Ruskin's classification of humor, social media users, especially those belonging to rival groups like Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), employ aggressive and obscene humor against their opponents. With the use of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), it becomes evident that meme makers use language discrepancies, domestic clichés, and cultural stereotypes to debunk the hypocrisy of the elite.

In the use of such humor in the face of invoking religion on one hand and the use of aggression on the other; the comparison of political commitment with the stability of marriage; or through satirizing the big speeches of nationalism delivered by individuals who have gone into self-exile, these jokes serve to deconstruct the heroic image-building efforts of political elites. Thus, humor becomes a "hidden transcript," as defined by James C. Scott.

In addition to personal political enmity, the discourse analysis shows that political satire in Pakistan involves socio-cultural and regional hierarchies embedded within the society. As can be observed from the examples of jokes based on ethnic or gender-based stereotypes, political satire is often expressed through existing social prejudices through which regional or domestic dependency becomes the basis for political satire. While satirical artifacts bring political debate within reach of ordinary people through the use of

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accessible digital content, they reproduce societal prejudice in the name of humor. The intertextuality involved in such memes requires common knowledge about judicial disqualification, civil-military conflict, and political corruption.

In summary, this paper has demonstrated that humor in political discourse in Pakistan is not mere entertainment but a potent tool of political struggle, opposition, and venting of emotions. Using Freud's theory of tendentious jokes together with DHA and CDA techniques, the study underscores how digital political humor allows people to temporarily neutralize asymmetric power dynamics and confront dominant regimes.

Even if political humor does not bring about any direct change to the framework of dictatorship or institutional outcome, the use of political humor acts as a very important tool for psychological comfort and instills political cynicism among people. Social media satire in Pakistan ensures that in a highly polarized political atmosphere where there is very little scope for political expression, laughter can never be underestimated.

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