

Disinformation used in political electioneering in Punjab by-elections

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Background

In March 2022 opposition parties in Pakistan initiated a no-confidence motion in the then ruling Chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf Party (PTI) and Prime Minister Imran Khan. The motion came to a vote in April 2022 and resulted in the fall of the then Government and a group of opposition parties formed a coalition and formed a government. Later, the opposition also turned its attention towards Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, also elected as a member of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI).

When Buzdar resigned, at least 25 PTI's MPs in the Punjab Assembly changed their party and joined the opposition benches when the re-election for the Leader of the House took place on 16th April.¹ Pakistan's constitution allows for a seat of an MP, elected to represent one political party, to fall vacant if the elected MP votes against that party in certain key votes, including that to elect a Chief Minister (Article 63A of Pakistan's Constitution)². The ex-PTI's MPs vote in favour of a non PTI nominee Chief Minister Hamza Shahbaz was challenged in the Supreme Court. The Court decided the petition in favor of PTI and ordered the Election Commission of Pakistan to hold by-elections in 20 general seats and 5 special quota seats, including two minority seats, in Punjab Assembly. These elections took place on 17th July 2022 and this paper concerns online traffic including hate speech during the pre-by-election period.

Before delving into the facts, it is worth mentioning that Pakistan has a history of sectarian violence, especially the targeting of Shia and Ahmadis. The sectarian rifts date back to the 1950s and 60s; the attacks on Shia Azadari processions and killings were started in 1957.³ Between 2001-2018, the Shia-Sunni sectarian crimes have taken the lives of more than 4,848 Shia across the country⁴.

Social media listening tools were used to track two weeks pre-polling, polling day and one-day post-election conversations on Twitter.

Details of monitoring results:

1. Imran Khan, an Ahmadi⁵, and agent of Jews

The following set of keywords was used for monitoring:

“Imran Lanti Qadiyani” [Curse on Imran Qadiyani], “Munafiq Yahoodi” [hypocrite Jewish] “Crush Imrani Qadiyani Fitna”. “PTI”, “PTI Supporters”, “Kafir” [infidel], “قادیانی بوتھ” [Qadiyani booth], “#ByeElection2022”, “یہودی قادیانی” [Jewish Ahmadi].

The following statistics show that the majority of conversations around the keyword “Crush Qadiyani Imrani Fitna” took place between 15th and 18th July. Although very few people were

¹ ECP de-seats 25 dissident PTI MPs in Punjab. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2357488/ecp-de-seats-25-dissident-pti-mpas-in-punjab>

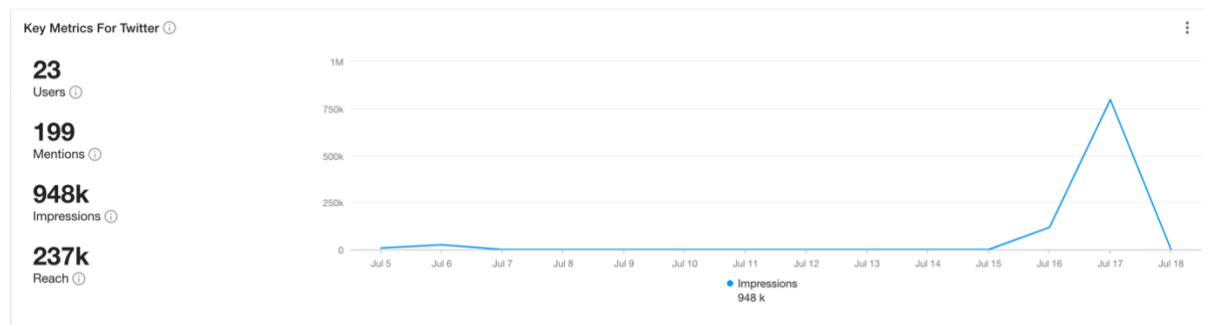
² Available here: <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part3.ch2.html>

³ A. Rieck, (2015). The Shias of Pakistan. Oxford University Press, pp. 88 – 98.

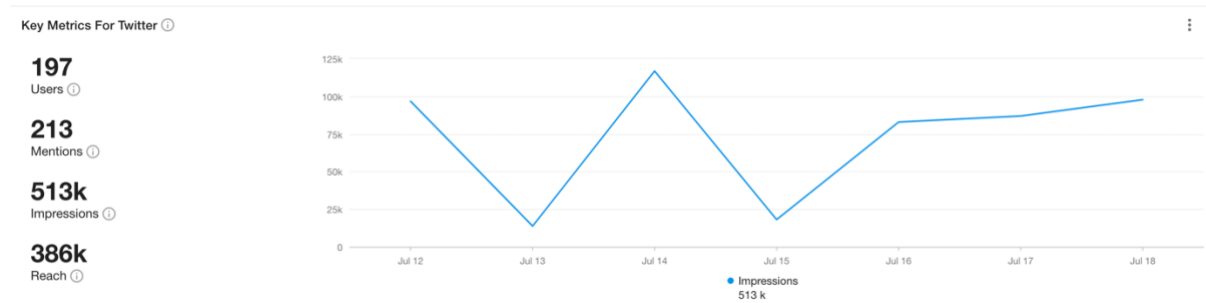
⁴ Siddiq, A (2016). Shia-Sunni rift on rise in Pakistan, but Imran Khan govt's silence may be strategic. <https://theprint.in/opinion/shia-sunni-rift-on-rise-in-pakistan-but-imran-khan-govts-silence-may-be-strategic/511942/>

⁵ Those of the Ahmadi faith self-identify as Muslims in Pakistan, however mainstream Muslims do not accept this. Persecution of Ahmadis is extensive, routine and acute; with professing their faith resulting in a potential death sentence under blasphemy laws. Associating any individual with this faith in public is to associate them with the most hated community in Pakistani society.

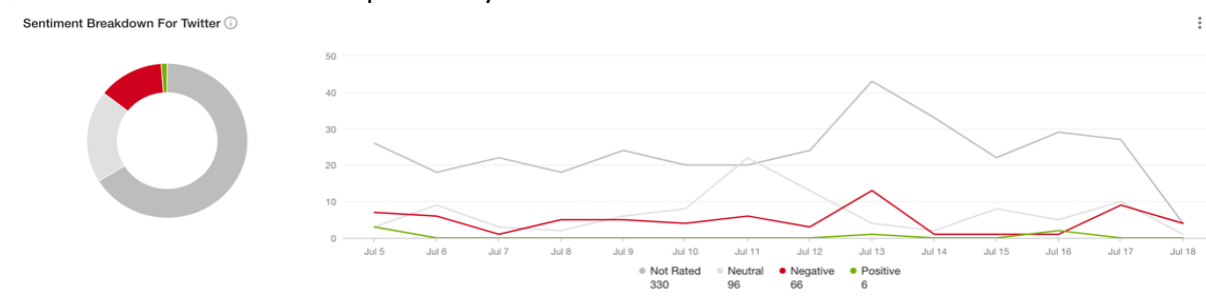
involved in originating such comments (23); however, the impressions and reach⁶ of the conversations were high i.e., 948,000 impressions and 237,000 reach respectively.



The following statistics show the majority of conversations discovered searching for “#ByElection2022” along with keywords “یهودی قادیانی”, “قادیانی بوتہ”, “Kafir”, “PTI” & “PTI Supporters” appeared between 12th and 18th July. Although relatively few people were involved in originating such comments (197); however, the impression and reach of the conversations were high i.e., 513,000 impressions and 386,000 reach respectively.



Sentiment analysis⁷ of this search result shows 96 Neutral, 6 Positive while 66 Negative sentiments based on hate speech keywords used in the conversations.



⁶ Reach means the total number of people on social media who clicked on a link to the content, whereas impression mean the number of times the content displayed to people.

⁷ Sentiment analysis informs the expressions shared in a conversation based on the mood, emotions, attitudes, etc. evident from the language or words used. Social media listening tools categorize them normally in three categories i.e. neutral, negative and positive.



In some of the conversations the former Prime Minister is being labelled as the agent of Jews and having ties with Jewish families and of being an Ahmadi himself. In other conversations, Imran Khan and his party are being portrayed as the supporters of the Ahmadiyya movement. One of the tweets also alleges that PTI is the party of Ahmadis, and that it was founded by an Ahmadi.

This is not the first time in Pakistan that a political party or its leaders have been named Ahmadis or supporters of Ahmadis, primarily in order to win the support of those who are opposed to Ahmadis in the elections. PML-N's former law minister Zahid Hamid had to resign over the anti-blasphemy protests in Pakistan, when he suggested to amend the words "I believe" to "I solemnly swear" in proclamation of Mohammad as the religion's last prophet⁸. In many cases, declaring someone to be an Ahmadi can also be tantamount to declaring them to be a blasphemer. Pakistan's blasphemy law, especially Sections 298-B (1) & (2) of the Penal Code of Pakistan (PPC) provides that for an Ahmadi any act including using the names of sacred Muslim personalities or proclaiming themselves to be Muslims or calling their worship places [Jammat Khanas] mosques or reciting Adhan (Muslim prayers) to be blasphemy. Similarly, levelling blasphemy allegations against political leaders has also resulted in violence and attacks in Pakistan. The former governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer was assassinated when he became vocal in support of Asia Bibi, who was charged with blasphemy⁹. She was earlier convicted by the lower courts and later acquitted by the Supreme Court. Former Minorities' Affairs Minister, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti was also assassinated in Islamabad two months after Salman Taseer's assassination for championing Asia Bibi's case¹⁰.

The tweet under discussion specifically suggests that support for Imran Khan will lead to individuals supporting or becoming part of the Ahmadiyya movement and will condemn them to hell in the afterlife.

⁸ France 24 Report. (2017). Pakistan's law minister resigns amid Islamist anti-blasphemy protests. <https://www.france24.com/en/20171127-pakistan-law-minister-resigns-islamist-anti-blasphemy-protests>

⁹ BBC Report. (2011). Punjab Governor Salman Taseer assassinated in Islamabad. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12111831>

¹⁰ Walsh, D. (2011). Pakistan minister Shahbaz Bhatti shot dead in Islamabad. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/02/pakistan-minister-shot-dead-islamabad>



Figure 1: Tweet is suggesting if someone votes for PTI that voter will also be called anti-Islamic "Qadiani Nawaz"

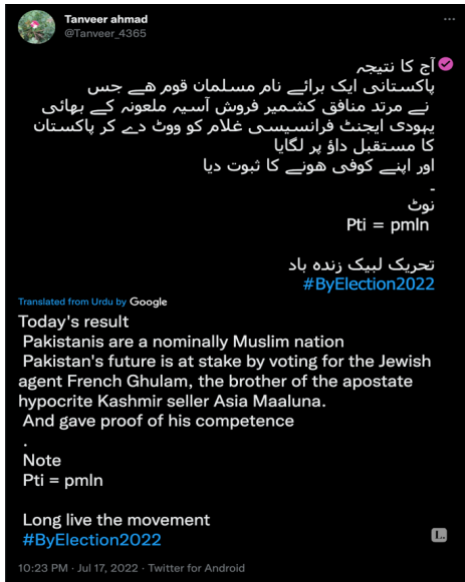


Figure 2: A tweet declaring Imran Khan as a Jewish agent and Ahmadi



Figure 3: A tweet alleging that Imran Khan's ex-brother in law, who supports Israel against Palestine also funds to Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf





2. PML-N top brass campaigned for radical anti-Shia party candidate

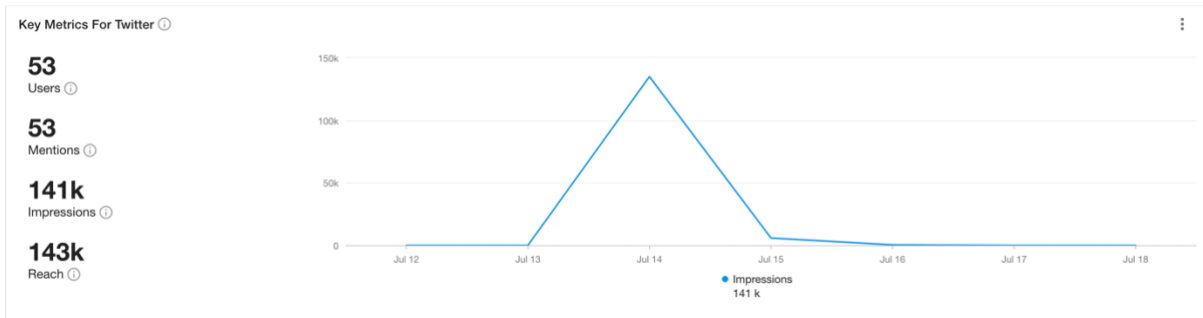
Another separate query tracked the following hashtags:

#مریم_نواز_گندی_آواز [translation: Maryam_Nawaz_Dirty_Voice]

#سازش_ہی_تھی [It_was_conspiracy]

#کراچی_حساب_لے_گا [Karachi_will_hold_accountable]

The following statistics show that the majority of conversations around the hashtag #مریم_نواز_گندی_آواز (Maryam_Nawaz_Dirty_Voice) happened between 13th and 16th July when she was leading an election campaign in Punjab. Although again very few people were involved in generating the content, the impression and reach of the conversations were high, i.e., 141,000 and 143,000 respectively.



On July 11th and 12th, 2022, Vice-President PML-N Maryam Nawaz visited constituencies in Sahiwal and Jhang districts respectively to conduct political campaign activities. Maryam Nawaz was seen to be sharing a campaign rally stage with Molana Mauvia Azam Tariq, a member of the banned outfit Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (after the ban the organization rebranded to become Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamat which was also banned until 2018 but is now allowed to operate). Sipah-e-Sahaba was banned because of activities such as spreading hatred against Shia and provoking Sunnis to incitement to violence. The appearance of the two politicians together triggered a communal rift on social media. PTI's National Assembly member (holding a seat reserved for women), Shandana Gulzar Khan highlighted it by criticizing Maryam Nawaz.

Shandana Gulzar Khan in her tweet wrote that Maryam Nawaz was seeking votes for a representative of an anti-Pakistani organisation and a terrorist, who himself and whose party openly refers to Shia as Kafir (disrespecting Shia individuals' free choice to follow a faith of their choosing and potentially continue to cite violence against Shia individual by mainstream Sunni Muslims)¹¹. In another tweet, Shandana also targeted Maryam's husband who holds an extremely radical stance against Ahmadis¹² (including tabling a resolution for changing the name of National Center for Physics at Quaid-i-Azam University to Abu al Fatah Abdul Rahman Al-Khazini. Former Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif in 2016 had given approval to rename the Center after the name of Professor Abdus Salam, a renowned Nobel laureate who practiced the Ahmadi faith.)



Figure 4: PML-N's Maryam Nawaz and ASWJ's Anas Muavia Tariq jointly conducting public rally in Jhang

¹¹ 4847 Shia have been killed in Pakistan between 2001-2018 in sectarian violence.
<https://theprint.in/opinion/shia-sunni-rift-on-rise-in-pakistan-but-imran-khan-govts-silence-may-be-strategic/511942/>

¹² PML-N's Capt Safdar lashes out against Ahmadis, faces backlash on social media.
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1362922>

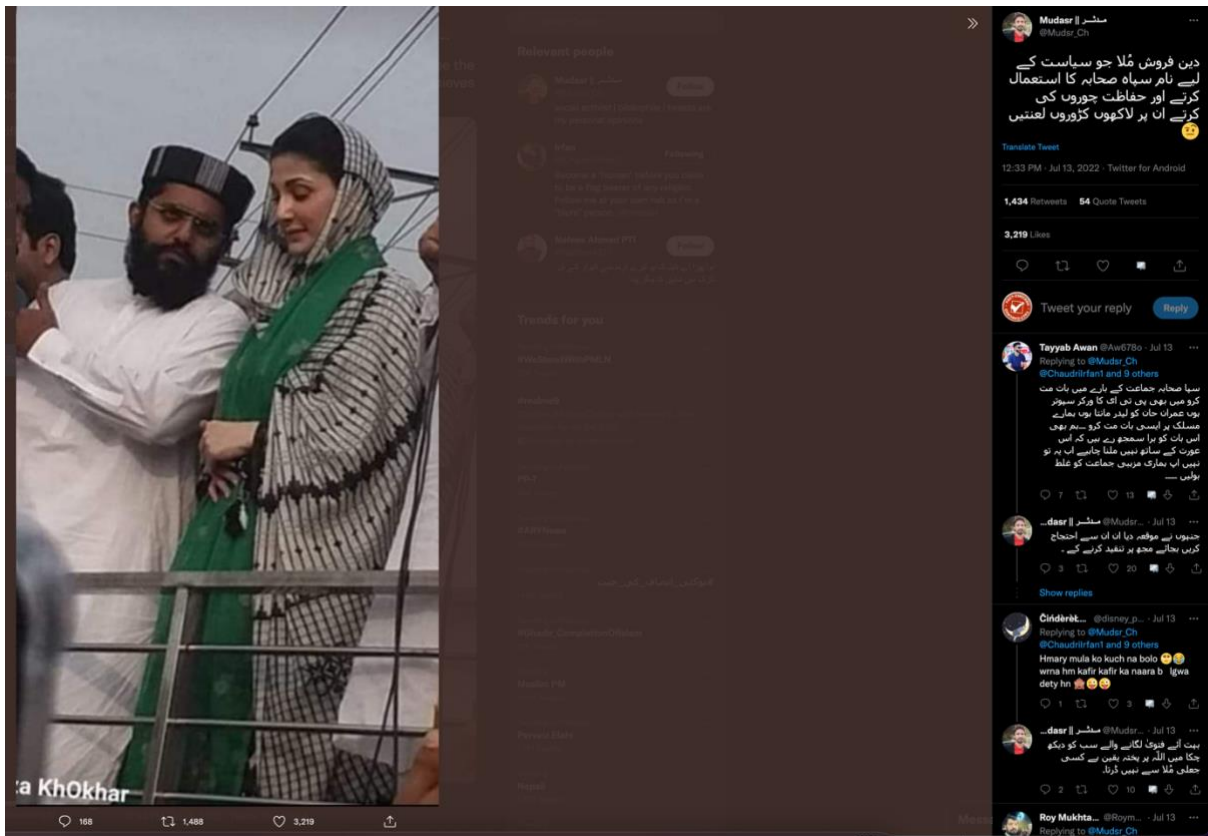
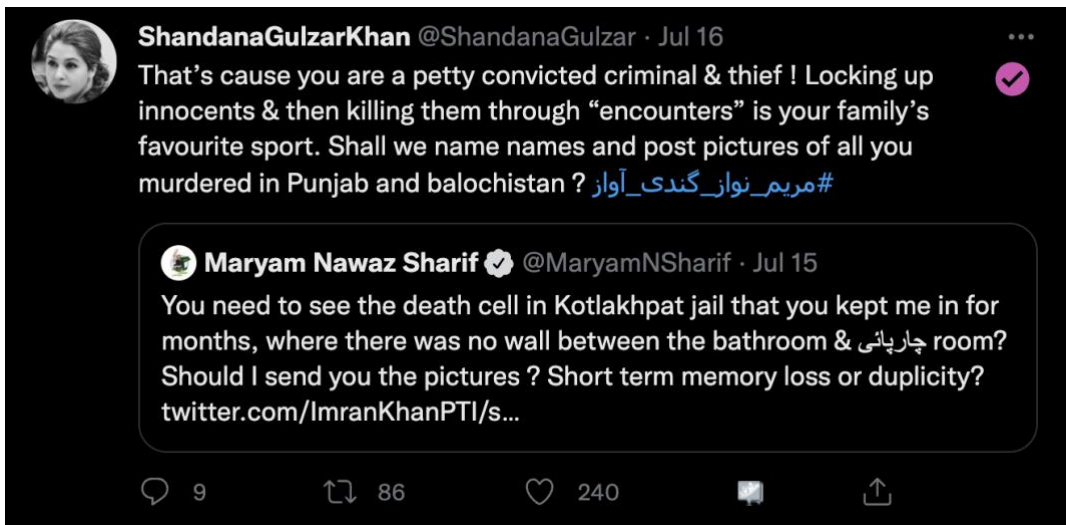


Figure 5: PML-N's Maryam Nawaz and ASWJ's Anas Muavia Tariq jointly conducting public rally in Jhang



Conclusion

Despite religion having no explicit bearing on the election, supporters of many candidates spread wild and unsubstantiated allegations about the faith of candidates and their supporters in a bid to gain support. Despite originating from a very small number of accounts, such statements were seen by at least 360,000 individuals [equivalent to 7.8% of the population eligible to vote in 20 constituencies, although monitoring took place across Pakistan].

Whilst the exchanges appear to have deepened social rifts between, in particular, different sects of Islam (Shia, Ahmadi and Sunni), the fact that they were primarily targeting political leaders has meant that the online hate did not translate (immediately) into real world violence. Indeed, only time will tell whether the depths of hatred and discrimination expressed and incited in some comments will translate into later violence or will be seen as “posturing” within the elite political classes which do not impact on daily lives of ordinary Pakistanis.

Commentators are concerned that this online hatred may swell manyfold during the upcoming general elections in 2023 [the schedule of which has not yet been announced]. There are several reasons why online hatred may be more prevalent during national elections as compared to Punjab's provincial by-elections; there will be a more politically charged environment across the country, with all political parties holding meetings and sharing their election manifestoes, which will generate more debates on social media. Although all political parties, except religious groups including Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal, and Jamat-e-Islami, in the past have expressed their willingness to safeguard the rights, lives and properties of religious minorities in Pakistan, during campaign periods, these commitments are frequently eroded or disrespected with multiple parties being responsible for spreading hate filled statements: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party's MPs several times in the past were involved in spreading hate against minority faith-based groups, particularly Ahmadiyya, Shia, Hindu and others.

It is advisable for state institutions particularly the Election Commission of Pakistan, the National Commission for Human Rights, and law enforcement agencies to look particularly into trends that have the potential to incite violence against religious faith-based groups during general elections and thwart the peaceful environment for democratic transition.