

## **Social Media: A Catalyst for Change in Pakistan?**

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### **Abstract**

The role and power of social media is growing in Pakistan, where there are now over 76 million mobile phone users in the country on the internet. There are more than 40 million social media users, and this number is growing daily with Facebook as the most widely used social media platform. This study provides preliminary findings on how social media is used by citizens and social groups, political parties and candidates, and the Prime Minister and his opponents, comparing three case studies using data from Facebook obtained via CrowdTangle in 2020. In the first case study, search term Arzoo, social media became voice of the suppressed, poor and marginalized in society when the underage marriage and forced conversion of Arzoo Raja, a 13-year Christian girl, brought citizens together and particularly Christian minority, to call for justice, with the sum of posts shared at 117,500 over a one-month period. The second case culminated over the same time period, searching on Gilgit-Baltistan, on the 2020 Assembly election in which parties and candidates used social media to reach and attract voters starting campaigning in June and the election was postponed to November, with the sum of posts shared at 1,216,837. The third case searching on Prime Minister Imran Khan, brought up posts by him, his allies and opponents, and the sample is one week in November 2020 before the Gilgit-Baltistan vote, with the sum of posts shared at 413,037. Shares represent the size of social network. The volume of posts and the drivers of public engagement online in the case of Arzoo, are compared with examples from political elites, to discuss whether social media may become a catalyst for change in Pakistan.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the virtual Midwest Political Science Association annual meetings (MPSA) in Chicago, April 2021.

### **Acknowledgements**

As a member of Dr. Holli A. Semetko's National Image research team, I accessed Facebook data on CrowdTangle, a public insights tool from Meta to analyze public content on social media, when I was in residence as a visiting scholar at Emory University for six months in the last half of 2020. I want to thank Dr. Semetko for her mentorship and Emory University's Department of Political Science for hosting me.

## Social Media: A Catalyst for Change in Pakistan?

### Introduction

Prior to the emergence of social media in Pakistan, there was a not insignificant amount of scholarship documenting the plight of religious minorities and in particular Christian minorities, only a few are mentioned here (Walbridge 2003; Rais, 2007; Gabriel 2008). Since the emergence and growth of social media in Pakistan, publications on the challenges faced by religious minorities and Christians in particular, though important, have not focused on the use of social media by minority citizens and social groups to address social change. An example is the special issue of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* and the impressive introductory article on “Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities Citizenship and Social Belonging,” by Fuchs & Fuchs (2019). And an earlier study in that same journal by Raina (2014), both of which do not consider the social media context. This study contributes to filling the gap in the literature given the growing use of social media in Pakistan.

With the emergence and widespread use of social media around the world, numerous studies have focused on how societies and technologies are changing including, just to name a few, “Persian Twitter” (Khazraee, 2019), India (Lal, 2015), and China (Shirk, 2010). In a cross-national comparative study, social media in the U.S. Spain, Turkey, and Ukraine were found to facilitate the exchange of:

“information that is vital to the coordination of protest activities, ...emotional and motivational contents in support of and opposition to protest activity, including messages emphasizing anger, social identification, group efficacy, and concerns about fairness, justice, and deprivation... and [the authors also demonstrate that]...structural characteristics of online social networks, which may differ as a function of political ideology, have important implications for information exposure and the success or failure of organizational efforts”. (Jost et al. 2018, 85).

Power shifting from governments and institutions into the hands of citizens using social media has given rise in South Asia to dozens of different online groups promoting peace on Facebook, YouTube and other platforms, which led Kumar and Semetko (2018, 612) to conclude that “peace communication in cross-border media flows indeed may have the potential to result in peace dividends in the form of fostering civil communication in shared values, culture, and collective well-being” in Pakistan and India. This study focuses on social media in Pakistan where the growing number of Facebook users was around 46 million in early 2021 (Kemp, 2021).

In a neighboring South Asian context, in the book *India Social*, the former social media strategist for India’s Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Ankit Lal (2014), writes not only about the importance of social media for the new political party which was born out of a social movement against corruption, he also includes important examples of how widespread social protest fueled by public outrage about violence against women has also utilized social media for social change. Lal (2014) discusses the promise of social media for improving the lives of women and girls,

focusing first on Nirbaya's legacy after the horrific gang rape of Jothi Singh in Delhi in 2012 and the protests that followed, and writes then on the need to reeducate and reform policy with social media campaigning such as the widespread campaign to #StopAcidAttacks in India.

This study investigates the protest on social media on one of the latest most outrageous violations of women and girls in Pakistan. The case of Arzoo, a 13-year old Christian minority girl and the efforts to find her, bring her home, and deliver justice, as the primary case study. Second and third case studies look at social media and political elites at different levels of governance to compare attention on social media to citizens protesting with political elites engaging in typical political activities. Quantifying the power of social media protest has only recently been addressed in the literature (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark 2018), and will be the focus of my future research on this still evolving case.

### **Case Studies and Data**

Three diverse case studies are used to compare the level of activity on Facebook in Pakistan (Gerring 2012). These different contexts range from social protest over the treatment of religious minorities and sexual assault of young women and girls which is a major problem in Pakistan, to the institutional level context of political campaigning in elections, a topic that has received considerable attention in a number of democracies. The third case considers the visibility of political leadership in the highest office of the country with focus on the Prime Minister (Stromer-Galley, 2013).

For each case, Facebook posts were downloaded from CrowdTangle using different search terms: Arzoo; Gilgit Baltistan; and Imran Khan. The variables I focus on here are (a) page name and (b) shares, with the latter reflecting the number of times each post from a page was shared among a user's network (Garmur, King, Mukerjee, Persily, Silverman, 2019). The time period under study is October 15 to November 15, 2020 for Arzoo's case. The final month of the campaign and vote in Gilgit-Baltistan took place over the same period, but because the initial campaign began in June, and then the election was postponed from September to November, the sample covers June to voting day. Finally, the week prior to the Nov. 15 vote is taken for a sample of posts that mention Imran Khan, Pakistan's Prime Minister. I am using a soft form of computational methods here sorting and identifying influencers these large datasets.

### **Findings**

#### **The case of Arzoo Raja**

The use of social media quickly meant the protests about 13-year-old Christian girl Arzoo Raja's abduction, conversion and forced marriage to a 44-year-old Muslim man was world news (Union of Catholic News, 2020). This is the main case study in this paper for it epitomizes much that needs to change and the analysis of Facebook pages and posts is a first step in the direction of understanding that change.

On October 13, 2020, Arzoo Raja, a 13-year-old Pakistani Christian, was abducted by her 44-year-old Muslim from the neighborhood, Ali Azhar. Her parents submitted a number of complaints to the police, asking for the police to bring her home given that she is a minor. The parents of the girl were later told by police that she had converted to Islam according to her own free will and married her abductor Ali Azhar. Arzoo's family lodged a police complaint and filed a petition in a local court to seek her safe return. Following this, in a shocking ruling on October 27, 2020 the Sindh High Court (SHC) validated the child marriage and refrained police from arresting the prime suspect, Ali Azhar (International Christian Concern, 2020).

The SHC initially ruled in favor of marriage, on the erroneous basis that Arzoo was 18 and that she had willingly converted to Islam and married Azhar. The Sindh Police presented the SHC with a "conversion certificate" to suggest that Arzoo had converted voluntarily. While the voluntary conversion is highly questionable, the document does not deal with the important issue that Arzoo, who was only 13, could not be seen as having converted voluntarily. Arzoo's parents proceeded to the SHC. There another issue emerged, that the fake marriage certificate said she was 18. This was despite the fact that Arzoo's family had her official birth certificate which showed she was 13, born in July 2007. Allegedly, the judge refused to look at the government registered birth certificate (Mizra, 2020; Pontifex, 2020).

After pressure from campaign groups and a public outcry, on November 2, 2020, Shireen Mazari, Minister for Human Rights in Pakistan, posted on social media that the SHC has ordered police to remove Arzoo from what in the U.S. would be called the 'marital home' and move her into a shelter home. Arzoo appeared before the court on November 5, 2020, and determined her age. After Arzoo's real age was verified, the High Court ordered law enforcement to recover the teenager and arrest Azhar. Arzoo was then taken to a government shelter, where she has been since. On November 9, 2020 the High Court in Sindh ruled that Arzoo was a minor and that her marriage to Azhar violated the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act. Arzoo returned to the women's shelter after she refused to reunite with her family and insisted that she had freely chosen to marry Azhar (Syed, 2020).

On November 23, 2020 the High Court in Sindh declined to dismiss the criminal charges against Azhar and ordered that Arzoo Raja remain in a government shelter home until she turns 18. On December 17, 2020 the court ordered the defendant Azhar be released on bail. Jibran Nasir, the lawyer representing Arzoo's parents, expressed regret over the court's decision to release Azhar. "*There are good, bad and at times even dark days for justice,*" Nasir said in a tweet following the ruling (Syed, 2020).

To fast forward to more than one year later, on 22 December 2021, the leading liberal English newspaper *Dawn* reported that Arzoo had filed an application to return to her parents' home, which was heard and granted by the SHC, under the following conditions:

The matter was taken up by a division bench of the high court today, which permitted Arzoo to return to her parents and stated that the girl would not be allowed to meet Azhar.

The court directed her parents to furnish a personal bond in the sum of Rs25,000 with one surety in the like amount and give an undertaking that they would not pressurise Arzoo to change her religion as she had told the court that she had willingly converted to Islam.

The court further directed Arzoo's parents to report to the station house officer (SHO) in their area, producing Arzoo before him every three months until she turns 18. The court stated that this was needed to ensure that the girl was being treated well by her parents, in accordance with its order (Tanoli, 2021).

This outcome on Arzoo's case illustrates that the court simply refused to consider what many likely believe, which is that Arzoo or her family may have been threatened or killed were the young teen to say in court that she did not convert to Islam willingly. Compared to the one-month period in fall 2020 when she was kidnapped, there was little in the way of celebration of this outcome on social media, given the sheer exhaustion experienced by Arzoo and her parents and younger brothers and sisters by mid-December 2021.

This is not a fake news story, this is a true story. It is a story of brutality, child abuse, forced conversion, underage marriage, and child rape. Arzoo's case raised a big question mark about the state machinery and human rights defenders, yet it also epitomized the lack of protection and safety for religious minority women and girls and sends the gruesome message that perhaps, they are lesser citizens (Mirza, 2020).

The sample period of Facebook posts on the search term "Arzoo" from mid-October to mid-November 2020 found that a number of pages from local Christian leaders and their organizations drove the online protest movement, coupled with some prominent Muslim civil rights activists. The Facebook pages of the top posts have large networks of followers. The top pages are described below, based on their About section on their Facebook pages. Follower numbers may have grown since the initial time of writing.

Christ The King Ministries, located in Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan, launched its Facebook page in 2013, which now has 113,018 followers. The page was a main driver because its posts were widely shared. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3484074675004806>

Muhammad Jibran Nasir, started his "Facebook page in 2013 where he describes himself as Lawyer, Political Activist, Pakistani. Lead Campaigner at Never Forget Pakistan, Trustee Elaj Trust." His Facebook page now has 492,594 followers. <https://www.facebook.com/MohammadJibranNasir>

Waqar Zika, has 3.5 million followers on Facebook where he describes himself as a "crypto social media influencer who loves educating and entertaining the world." He posted his 27-minute Urdu video show on Oct. 30, 2020, titled the "Challenge from Arzoo Raja," which includes video from Arzoo's mother crying, and interviews with those comment on Sindh High Court's initial decision to recognize her 'marriage'. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=723483044924784>

ACI Prensa launched in 2008 on Facebook and has 2.33 million followers. It is a Catholic global news agency.

<https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/liberan-a-nina-catolica-obligada-a-convertirse-al-islam-y-a-casarse-con-un-musulman-46173>

Jesus is Coming Soon, is a public Facebook group launched in 2015 with 166,000 members.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/840270079393282/permalink/3446280122125585>

Pastor Anwer Fazal (Man of God), launched the Facebook page in 2017 as Pastor Incharge at Eternal Life Ministries and Isaac Television Lahore, Pakistan, and has over 30,000 followers.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2683062511955218&set=p.2683062511955218&type=3>

Dekhlo, launched its Facebook page in 2019, is “A Place where you will get Entertainment, Music, Sports and News from around the Globe,” or a new site.

<https://www.facebook.com/DekhloTv/posts/999618283866719>

Gospel TV and World News, launched on Facebook in 2014, “This Is First Christian Religion Channel In Pakistan, Through This Channel Non-Christian People Should Be Able To Understand The Christianity through Christian documentary, Films, Worship and News.”

<https://www.facebook.com/GospelTvPakistan/posts/3183884458384088>

Dr Jamil Nasir (The Man of God), launched on Facebook in 2018. Dr Jamil Nasir is a pastor and head of the Church of Pentecost and Theological Research Centre in Lahore, Pakistan.” A public group on Facebook with over 111,200 members.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/177402146474580/permalink/648353392712784>

Dawn.com is a leading liberal newspaper in Pakistan with an international audience. Dawn carried the news on the recent agreement by the Court to let Arzoo live with her family on Dec. 23, 2021, under the headline: “SHC accepts Arzoo’s plea to live with parents, practise Islam.”

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1665310>

Preliminary findings suggest that these Facebook pages were the top drivers of the social justice movement for Arzoo, but there were also many other people and organizations posting on the evolving story as can be seen in Figure 1. The sum of the total posts were shared was 117,506. The percentage breakdown of shared posts by source (Facebook page) is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

The biggest protestors and drivers of justice for Arzoo were the churches and in particular Christ the King Ministries, ACI Prensa, Jesus is Coming Soon, Pastor Anwer Fazal (Man of God), United Christian Youth Fellowship, Gospel TV and World News, Dr. Jamil Nasir (Man of God), The Minority Times – Religious Minorities News and Updates, Army of Jesus Christ, Lovers of Jesus Christ, Fan of Dr Rev Jameel Nasir, God is Alive.TV and Francis Feroz – Gospel Singer, etc. There were also many smaller lesser-known pages that made less than 10 posts for example.

I continue to go through data file to confirm that in each Facebook page, the case of Arzoo is actually mentioned. This time-consuming version of data cleaning so far has found that in two of the top shared pages that mentioned the name Arzoo, were not about her or the case. One was in reference to a celebrity named Arzoo (the page of Anis Art Production) and another in reference to the historical figure (the page on Allam Iqbal, an initiative of the IIS-international Iqbal Society). Because I am still in the process of validating every single page in the data set of more than 2,124 pages, which included 1,455 pages that had only a single post, the findings from the entire data set remain preliminary.

### **The Case of 2020 Elections in Gilgit Baltistan**

Yasir Hussain (2014) argues that social media can be a tool for good governance and transparency in Gilgit-Baltistan, where residents voted in mid-November 2020 for members of the assembly after a campaign period of about one month. This preliminary research on the political parties and social media in the 2020 elections in Gilgit-Baltistan compares the political parties, a number of which are national, in terms of their social media presence and specifically the party pages posting on Facebook during the campaign.

Gilgit-Baltistan is a Pakistan administered region. The incumbent PTI government is trying its best to grant provisional provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan. On November 15, 2020, elections were held in 23 of the 24 constituencies of Gilgit-Baltistan. The 3rd Assembly of GB was elected on 15 November 2020 polls held across GB. The party position and the distribution of reserved seats is shown in Table 1. The Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly (GBA) consists of 33 seats and 24 of which are contested through direct elections. The remaining nine are reserved seats — six for women and three for technocrats and professionals.

Table 1 about here

The ruling party in the federation, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) formed the government in Gilgit Baltistan after securing majority in the 2020 Legislative Assembly election. But after gaining support of six independent winners and allotment of six reserved seats, PTI has secured 22 out of the 33 seats in the Assembly. PTI was declared successful in 10 seats, independent candidates won seven seats, PPP obtained three, PML-N won two, whereas JUI and MWM won one seat each. There were 10,968 posts from 90 Facebook pages that mentioned Gilgit Baltistan between June and November 2020, as can be seen in Figure 2. The longer sample period was due to the fact that the elections were to take place in the summer but were postponed until November 15, 2020 due to COVID-19. Figure 3 shows the most important Facebook pages in terms of posts shared that mentioned Gilgit Baltistan.

It is important to observe that the top pages in terms of posts include news media before the PTI as in Figure 2, but in terms of shares the political parties appear to have larger networks than the news outlets as in Figure 3, which shows the top posts shared were from PTI, then PPP, followed by PML (N).

Figures 2 and 3 about here

Although it was not possible to investigate the candidates from these political parties for this paper, I intend that to be a next step in the analysis. In the case of Gilgit Baltistan, preliminary findings show different levels of engagement generated by posts from the official pages of political parties. A next step in this case study will be to focus on the candidates and their posts during the campaign to address questions about negative campaigning, candidates and issues.

### **Case study: Prime Minister Imran Khan**

Prime Minister Imran Khan along with his political party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), have been using social media more extensively than any other political party, mostly Twitter and Facebook, and were followed by millions of Insafians (PTI Supporters) and well-wishers even before his party came into Government. (Social Champ, 2018). The popularity of Imran Khan can be well understood when in July 2019, at least 20,000 Pakistani-Americans reached at Capital One Arena stadium in Washington D.C. for listening PM Imran Khan's speech. They waited for PM Imran Khan, and posted updates on their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. On social media, they were accompanied by hundreds of volunteers working for PTI's Social Media wing came to the field and posted updates about the D.C. gathering for PM. The volunteers had a variety of tasks, as they were instructed to promote PTI government's official hashtag for public gathering. (Jahangir, 2020).

Imran Khan's official Facebook page, launched in 2010, has 10,752,748 followers and nearly as many 'likes,' when I checked at the initial time of writing April 9, 2021. The page has managers in Pakistan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom and the United States of America. With over 13 million of followers on Twitter, "his online presence has given him the title of 'Facebook Khan' and 'Social Media's Prime Minister', and his political party Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) was always ahead of the curve on using online media for building its and its leader Imran Khan's brand" (Jahangir, 2020).

Because of his popularity online, a smaller more manageable sample of one week of posts that mentioned Imran Khan was obtained from Nov. 6 to 13, 2020. These reveal that Prime Minister Khan's page is the top Facebook page responsible for the largest percentage of shared posts, as can be seen in Figure 4. Around Easter 2021, he wished all Christian citizens of Pakistan a Happy Easter with a colorful poster that shows three happy (apparently young teenage) girls in front of a church, which is in Figure 5. It is an image that cannot help but remind one of what Easter was like for Arzoo before her childhood, her religion, her family and her future was stolen from her.

Figures 4 and 5 about here



But PTI is no longer the only big player in the online sphere. Other political parties, including PML-N and PPP, as can be seen from their activity in the Gilgit Baltistan campaign. Nevertheless, posts that mentioned Imran Khan in that week in November just before the vote in Gilgit Baltistan were shared 413,037 times as seen in Fig. 4.

## **Discussion**

Social media played a pivotal role in raising the issue of Arzoo's case, child marriage and Sharia law in Pakistan and abroad. Arzoo united the religious minorities in Pakistan for a single cause. The issue was quickly picked up by international media and triggered mass protests and demonstrations in Pakistan. The overall impact of Facebook pages of Christian churches and ministries as well as civil rights activists in Pakistan played a key role for awareness calling for justice for Arzoo.

Despite the fact that such cases of child kidnapping, forced conversation and under-age marriage and rape have been occurring with tragic frequency in Pakistan, Arzoo Raja's case may be the first time that such a broad global network of Christians protested online, coupled with leading civil rights activists with millions of followers such as Muhammad Jibran Nasir and Waqar Zika, and more. This case study provides insight into the civil society movement online for Arzoo, but it is a case that is now receiving little to no attention in the news media nor on social media with the exception of mid-December 2021 when the High Court agreed to Arzoo's petition to be returned to her parents, but under the Court's aforementioned conditions, one being that she would not be converted to another religion as she had declared in court at age 13 that she willingly converted to Islam. It is not only 13-year-old Arzoo who was violated by a man 30 years her senior, there are many religious minority girls in their early teenage years and older teens, and young women whose rights have been violated. But not all cases have received as much attention, which I attribute to the organizations and human rights influencers on Facebook in Pakistan.

Yet based on the volume of shares which is an indicator of network size, it is clear that Pakistan's political elite are far more influential on social media than the social justice protests for Arzoo. In the Gilgit Baltistan case, for example, the Prime Minister's party, PTI's page, as well as other parties' pages including PPP, and PML (N), were even more influential on social media than the news media pages on Facebook. In the case of Prime Minister Imran Khan, we see how big the visibility gap is between the head of the government, whose top post merited 275,438 interactions, and others. The presence of Imran Khan on social media also arguably enhanced his popularity among the youth of Pakistan and those who want change in country. His presence on social media likely led followers to actively participate in politics and election campaigns.

Taken together, these three cases provide preliminary findings that suggest the political elite in Pakistan, as in many countries, are the greatest influencers on social media compared to social movements like the one for Arzoo in Pakistan, measured by the size of the social network in the sum of the posts shared from the sample periods. Future research on Arzoo's case will involve my interviews with members of leading organizations posting on this topic in Pakistan. The data presented here from Crowdtangle will also be used to discuss the characteristics of the most widely shared posts by individuals and organizations, and the timeline.

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Figure 1

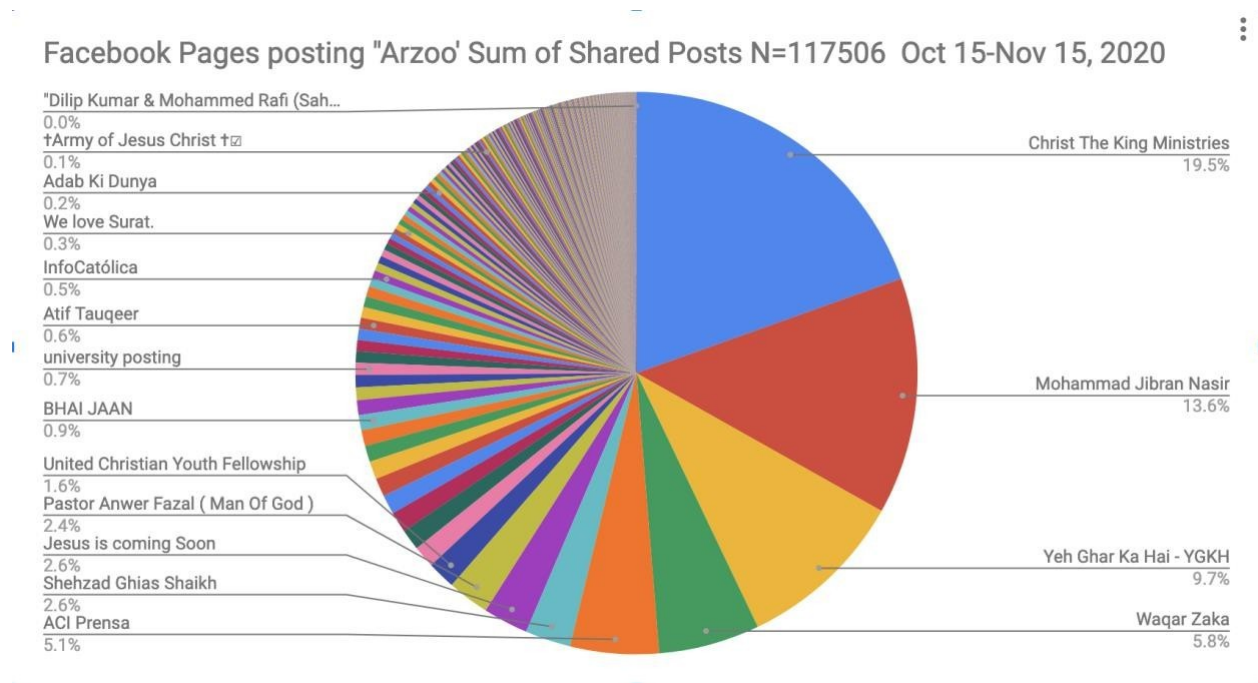


Table 1 Gilgit Baltistan's Political Parties and types of reserved seats in 2020

Party	Members			Total
	General Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Reserved Seats for Technocrats	
PTI	16	4	2	22
PPP	3	1	1	5
PML	2	1		3
BNF	1			1
MWM	1			1
JUI	1			1
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Source:</b> Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan <a href="http://ecgb.gov.pk/index.htm">http://ecgb.gov.pk/index.htm</a>				

Figure 2

### 90 Facebook pages 10,968 posts on Gilgit Baltistan June - Nov 15, 2020

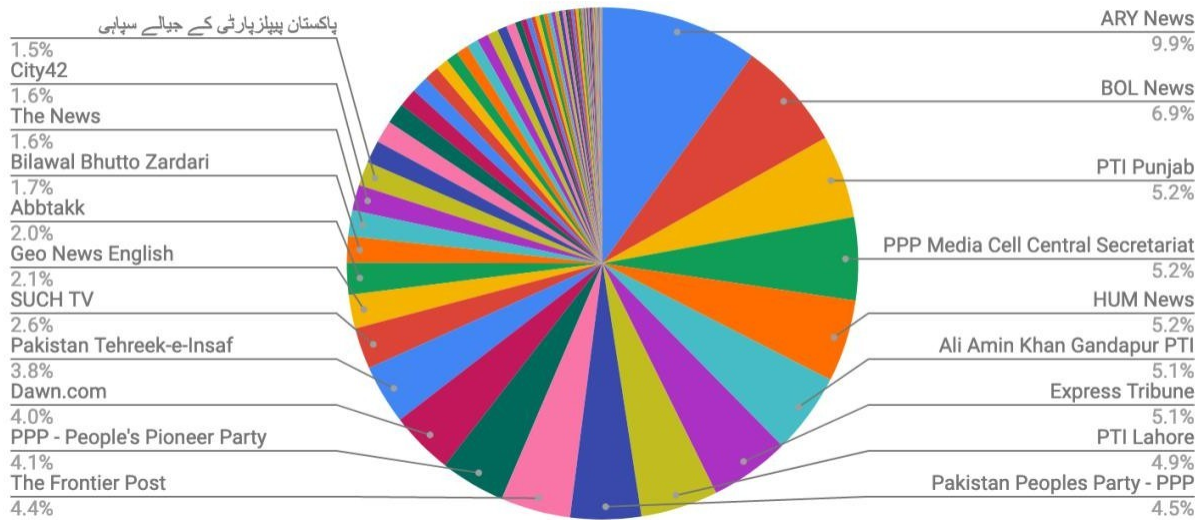
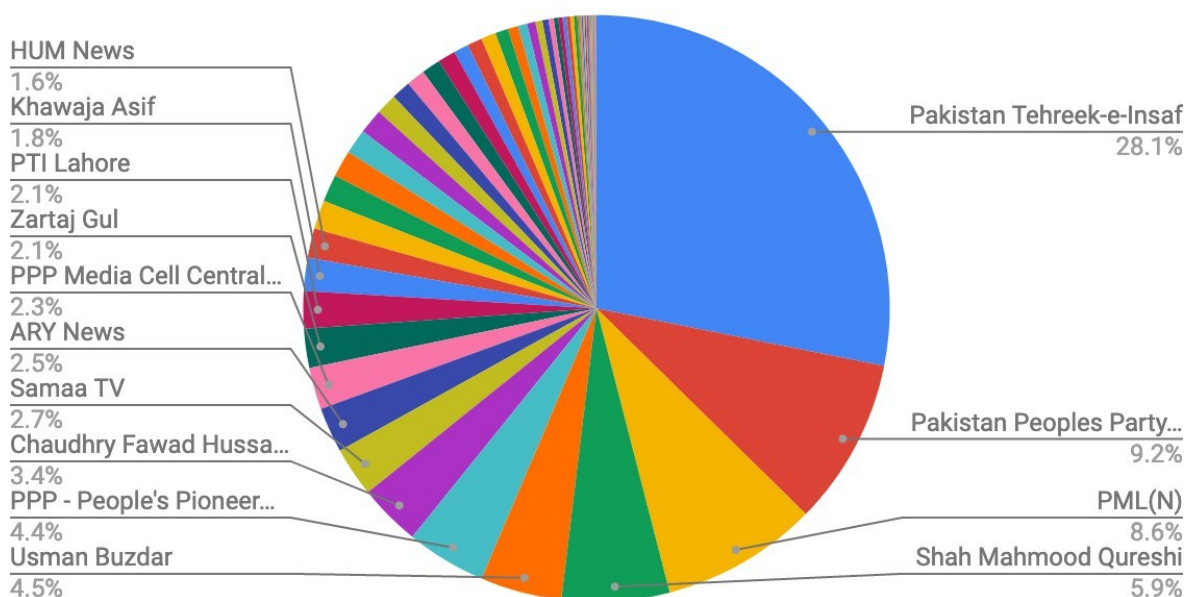


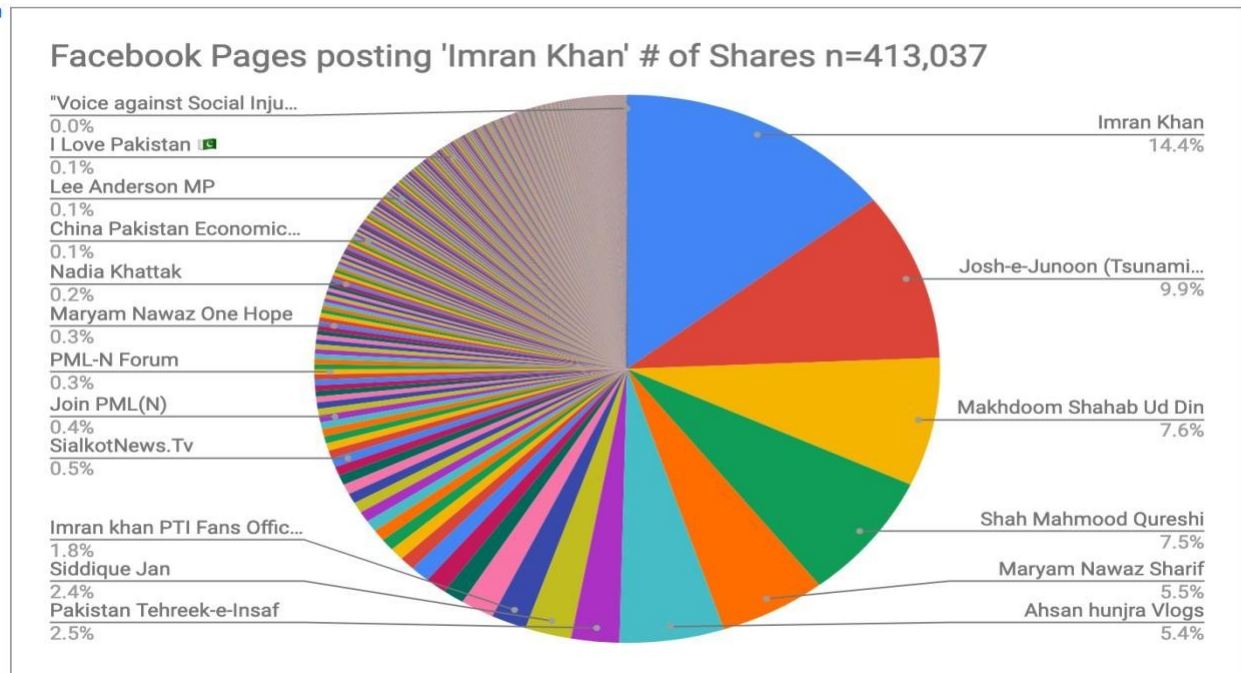
Figure 3

### Facebook Pages mentioning Gilgit Baltistan: Sum of Shared Posts as Percent of All Shares (n=1,216, 837)



Note: Sample is from June to Nov. 15, 2020.

Figure 4



Note: Sample is for one week from Nov. 6, to Nov. 13, 2020



Figure 5. Prime Minister Imran Khan's 2021 Happy Easter post on Facebook

