



Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism

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**Symbolic Dissent in the Digital Age:
Multimodal Resistance to Authoritarianism
in Pakistan**



Waqasia Naeem

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About the Author

Dr. Waqasia Naeem is an accomplished linguist, discourse analyst, and English language teacher with over sixteen years of academic and research experience. She holds a PhD in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and her research explores the intersection of language, power, and ideology. Her scholarly expertise spans peace and war discourses, hate and discrimination, digital media communication, and political discourse.



Mehmet Tohti

Dr. Naeem has presented her research at several international conferences and has published in reputable national and international journals. Her work draws on multidisciplinary frameworks, integrating Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, van Dijk's Social Cognition Theory, and Systemic Functional Linguistics to examine how discourse constructs, legitimates, and challenges power relations in society.

Abstract

This study investigates how Social Networking Sites serve as non-violent forms of resistance to authoritarianism in Pakistan, where increasing state control manifested through media censorship, legal surveillance, and suppression of dissent has curtailed traditional avenues of political expression. In this constrained environment, platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram have emerged as critical arenas for alternative civic engagement. Drawing on Digital Resistance Theory, this research examines how citizens, particularly youth, activists, and journalists, use memes, hashtags, satirical videos, and citizen journalism to articulate dissent, critique power structures, and create counter-narratives. The study employs qualitative multimodal discourse analysis, grounded in the social semiotic approach of Kress and van Leeuwen, to examine how resistance is constructed across multiple modes such as textual, visual, auditory, and interactive. A purposive corpus of social media posts related to key authoritarian events (e.g., political arrests, digital crackdowns, and internet shutdowns) will be analyzed to explore how irony, metaphor, emotion, and symbolism function as tools of non-violent resistance. The research also investigates how the affordances of digital platforms like anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification reshape dissent in the digital age. In light of the growing influence of artificial intelligence in shaping discourse and public perception, the study further calls for the development of new interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that support non-violent civic initiatives in the AI era. These frameworks should account for the evolving digital ecologies, the ethical use of AI tools in civic activism, and the role of automated systems in both suppressing and enabling resistance. This research contributes to the discourse on digital resistance in hybrid regimes by foregrounding how multimodal, non-violent digital practices redefine political participation, create spaces for democratic expression, and offer innovative pathways for civic engagement in the face of authoritarianism.

1. Introduction

Pakistani society has witnessed an increase in authoritarian practices, including media censorship, digital surveillance, and the suppression of political dissent (Nelson, 2025). From the shutdown of news channels, restrictions on holding rallies, to the criminalization of online expression, traditional avenues for civic and community participation and protest have become increasingly restricted. This tightening of control has given rise to alternative forms of engagement, particularly within the digital world. Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok have emerged as critical spaces where citizens articulate dissent (both political and social), challenge state narratives, and engage in political discourse, often through non-violent, humorous, and creative means.

In this context, the digital media landscape has emerged as not merely a communication or socialising tool but also as a platform to contest and resist authoritarian tendencies. Social media users, especially youth, social activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens, are increasingly turning to memes, hashtags, satirical videos, and forms of citizen journalism to express political frustrations and concerns, highlight injustices, and build communities of resistance and dissent. Hence, rooted in irony, symbolism, humour, and emotional appeal, these social media platforms become a potent form of protest in contexts like Pakistan, where overt political opposition is risky or severely censored.

This study investigates the role of digital practices as non-violent resistance to authoritarianism in Pakistan. Drawing on Digital Resistance Theory (Postill, 2014), the research explores how resistance is performed and communicated through multimodal digital texts. Additionally, it applies the social semiotic approach of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to analyze how meaning is constructed across visual, textual, auditory, and interactive dimensions of social media posts. The research is focused on understanding the unique affordances of digital platforms such as anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification, which enable and shape non-violent political expression of dissent. Furthermore, as artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly mediates online discourse, the study considers both the enabling and suppressive roles of AI systems in shaping civic resistance.

Focusing on the Pakistani political system, a hybrid regime where authoritarian tendencies persist alongside electoral democracy (Talbot, 2021), this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital resistance under repression. It reveals how non-violent, multimodal digital practices offer innovative pathways for civic engagement, democratize political expression, and challenge hegemonic power structures in constrained environments.

2. Literature Review

Pakistan's political landscape is marked by a complex interplay between democratic processes and authoritarian control. While electoral politics and a vibrant civil society exist, these are frequently undermined by military influence, legal repression, and state censorship. According to Freedom House (2024), Pakistan remains "Partly Free with an overall score of 35/100" as there are significant constraints on media freedom and expression. The governments employ a range of tools to control the narrative, including sedition laws, cybercrime legislation, internet shutdowns, and surveillance technologies. Journalists, activists, political dissidents, and even common people often face harassment, arrest, or enforced disappearance, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.

In a context characterised by the aforementioned social repression, digital spaces have become both sites and tools in the battle for narrative control. Crackdowns on social media, such as the temporary banning of X and internet blackouts during protests, reflect the state's attempts to suppress online dissent. Yet, at the same time, these platforms have become crucial spaces for alternative political expression, particularly for younger demographics who are often excluded from traditional political forums.

John Postill's Digital Resistance Theory DRT (2014) offers a framework for understanding how digital media facilitates everyday forms of resistance in repressive contexts. Unlike traditional models of organized protest, digital resistance is often decentralized, symbolic, and rooted in the routines of everyday digital life. It encompasses practices such as satire, irony, humour, meme-sharing, hashtag activism, and the subversive remixing of official narratives, forms of protest that can bypass overt censorship while still expressing dissent. Postill emphasizes that resistance does not always aim at regime change; rather, it often seeks to disrupt, expose, or ridicule power structures. This distinction is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where overt political mobilization is risky, and digital content becomes a safer (though still precarious) medium for contestation. Thus, DRT provides a lens to examine how symbolic, creative, and semiotic practices operate as low-risk yet potent forms of political engagement and resistance.

The social semiotic approach of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) views meaning-making as inherently multimodal. In the digital realm, messages are rarely communicated through text alone; they involve a dynamic interplay of visuals, language, sound, and interactivity, such as a meme critical of a political figure may combine irony (linguistic mode), a symbolic image (visual mode), and timing (interactive mode via reposts or trends). The multimodal discourse analysis explores how various semiotic resources work together to construct resistance.

Also, this allows users to manipulate these multiple modes to create powerful critiques. In authoritarian contexts like Pakistan, where direct political posts may lead to censorship, surveillance, or arrests (in extreme cases), the indirectness, ambiguity, and subtlety of multimodal content become key strategies of survival, subversion, and resistance.

The effectiveness of digital resistance is deeply shaped by the affordances of the platforms it inhabits. As outlined by Boyd (2010) and later by Treem and Leonardi (2012), affordances such as persistence, visibility, editability, and association allow users to craft and circulate content in strategic ways. In Pakistan, features like anonymity on Twitter or ephemeral content on Instagram Stories are used to minimize risk, while the potential for virality provides users with a way to amplify marginalized voices (Tariq, 2025). However, these affordances also carry limitations. Algorithmic gatekeeping can suppress politically sensitive content, and platform policies may align with state interests, particularly under pressure, as witnessed in the banning of X in Pakistan. The double-edged nature of digital affordances demands a nuanced understanding of how users navigate these platforms tactically to engage in resistance without facing retaliation.

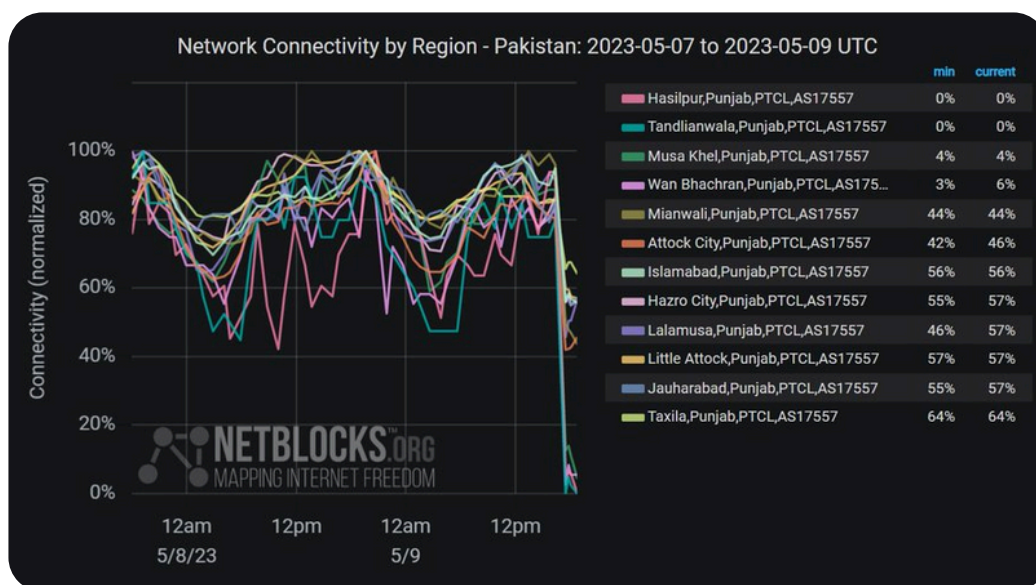
The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into content moderation, surveillance, and recommendation systems introduces new complexities for digital resistance. AI-driven tools such as automated flagging, facial recognition, and predictive policing can extend the state's capacity to exercise control, monitor, and even suppress dissent. In Pakistan, reports of raised significant concerns about digital safety and rights (Amnesty International, 2025). Nevertheless, AI also holds potential as a tool for civic activism. The social media activists use AI to anonymize faces in photos, generate politically charged art, or amplify campaigns using algorithmically optimized strategies. This dual role of AI, as both a suppressive and empowering force, highlights the urgent need for interdisciplinary ethical frameworks that address the evolving role of technology in civic life. Scholars such as Zuboff (2019) and Eubanks (2018) warn of "surveillance capitalism" and automated inequality, reinforcing the need to approach digital activism with caution and critical awareness.

While existing literature offers rich insights into digital activism, multimodal discourse, and platform affordances, few studies bring these strands together within the specific context of authoritarian repression and non-violent activism in Pakistan. Even fewer address the multimodal strategies that social media users employ to navigate censorship and AI-driven suppression. This study fills that gap by combining digital resistance theory, social semiotics, and platform analysis to explore how ordinary users construct dissent through creative, multimodal content, offering a fresh perspective on resistance in hybrid regimes.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in an interpretivist epistemology that seeks to understand the meaning-making processes behind non-violent digital resistance in Pakistan. Given the nuanced, symbolic, and context-dependent nature of social media activism, qualitative methods are best suited to unpack the complex interplay of language, visuals, and platform dynamics. Specifically, the study employs multimodal discourse analysis (2006) to investigate how resistance is constructed and communicated across multiple semiotic modes—textual, visual, auditory, and interactive. The research is exploratory, aiming to uncover linguistic patterns, discursive strategies, and symbolic meanings in user-generated content related to political repression, social mobilisation, and authoritarian control in Pakistan.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to curate a corpus of social media posts that exemplify digital resistance. The data includes content from Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, and Instagram, focusing on posts circulated during specific authoritarian events between 2022 and 2024, such as arrests of political figures (e.g., Imran Khan), internet and social media shutdowns, crackdowns on journalists or student activists, and instances of online censorship or takedowns. The data was collected based on the contents' visibility or virality and relevance to the themes of dissent and resistance. The data is limited because many of the viral posts have been deleted by the government under a censorship agenda. The dataset includes a range of formats such as memes, short videos, protest images, hashtag threads, and screenshots. As it is a sensitive matter in hybrid regimes like in Pakistan, ethical considerations were prioritized by anonymizing user identities and excluding content that could potentially endanger individuals involved in politically sensitive activism.



Internet Shutdown amid the arrest of Former PM Imran Khan in May 2023

This study is limited by its focus on publicly available content, potentially excluding encrypted or private forms of digital resistance (e.g., WhatsApp groups, Signal chats). It also primarily analyzes content in English and Roman Urdu, which may not capture resistance in regional languages. Finally, as platform algorithms and political contexts rapidly evolve, the findings represent a snapshot of a particular moment rather than a static condition.

3.1 Analytical Framework

To analyze the selected content, the study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) grounded in the social semiotic framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This approach treats all modes—text, image, sound, gesture, layout—as resources for meaning-making, recognizing that communication in digital spaces is inherently multimodal. Each post in the dataset is analyzed across the following dimensions:

Textual Mode: Text in hashtags, captions, slang, and code-switching

Visual Mode: Imagery, symbols, design elements, visual metaphors

Auditory Mode: Background music, voiceovers, tone (in video posts)

Interactive Mode: Engagement metrics, comment sections, tagging, and timing

The rhetorical functions of irony, metaphor, humor, and emotional appeal are also analyzed as the contents are examined not only for what they say but the way the messages are encoded with mobilisation affect, inviting participation, and resistance in culturally intelligible ways.

Through its design, technology enables particular types of actions or characteristics of actions called ‘affordances’. Interestingly, each platform offers different affordances and constraints. The analysis also considers the technical and cultural logics of the platforms themselves, as Twitter/X offers real-time commentary, anonymity, trending hashtags, while Instagram is more popular for the visual storytelling, ephemeral content (stories), and aesthetic appeal. TikTok has a virality aspect through remixing, audio layering, and short-form satire. These affordances are evaluated not only for how they enable resistance but also for how they shape the form and visibility of dissent.

4. Analysis and Findings

Using Digital Resistance Theory (Postill, 2014) and the social semiotic model of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), it identifies four key strategies of digital resistance: memes and satire, hashtag activism, citizen journalism, and platform-specific tactical engagement. These practices are examined as multimodal forms of dissent embedded in everyday digital culture and shaped by the affordances of the platforms on which they appear.

4.1 Memes and Satirical Videos as Resistance

Memes and short-form satirical videos function as symbolic, low-risk forms of protest in authoritarian settings (Postill, 2014; Highfield, 2016). In Pakistan, SNS users purposely use popular culture songs and references, film scenes and dialogues, and trending formats to critique the state or political figures employing humor, satire, and irony to avoid direct confrontation (Mohan and Kaul, 2021). A meme referencing a Bollywood scene during Imran Khan's arrest, for example, used visual metaphor and sarcastic captions to imply judicial complicity without naming institutions, aligning with Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden transcripts". Such ways blur the distinction between entertainment and dissent, making them legible to sympathetic audiences while bypassing algorithmic detection or censorship (Tufekci, 2017). TikTok posts layered with trending audios/songs with politically charged visuals or captions exemplify "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015). It creates a network of emotionally engaged users mobilized through cultural, religious symbols and thereby the digital utterance of dissent.

4.2 Hashtag Campaigns and Symbolic Mobilization

Hashtag activism has emerged as a central element of networked resistance (Gerbaudo, 2012). The networked resistance helps the like-minded SNS users to express the same message while increasing the likelihood of virality of post. In Pakistan, hashtags like #ReleaselmranKhan, #InternetShutdownPK, #BanMediaCensorship, and #sharkattack #votekoizzatdo functioned as rallying points that represented collective identities and enabled real-time mobilization (Rambukkana, 2015). These hashtag campaigns functioned as combined emotional urgency with ideological language (e.g., "digital jihad," "freedom blackout"), showing language as a powerful tool to amplify dissent and construct resistance (Wozniak et al., 2022). Additionally, hashtags serve as archival tools, creating digital footprints of dissent even after the events happened (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). The interactive dimension that blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers of the content, when the posts/tweets are reshared, reflects platform affordances that shape how dissent is circulated and perceived (boyd, 2010; Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Hence, hashtags serve as both tools of protest, expressing dissent, and also as storehouses of collective memory.

4.3 Citizen Journalism and Alternative Narratives

Another feature is citizen journalism, a key resistance tactic under state-controlled media (Allan, 2013). The rampant use of smartphones has further increased the documentation of incidents, such as during protests, arrests, or police violence. SNSs are frequent platforms to instantly share content with global audiences, bypassing institutional filters and censorship. One viral livestream of a student protest arrest exemplified this mode of resistance. The raw video footage, combined with on-the-ground commentary and emotional appeals, generated both affective resonance and political urgency (Chouliaraki, 2015).



Asad Ali Toor's YouTube channel was blocked in June 2025 after authorities accused it of spreading 'anti-state' content critical of state institutions.

The firsthand documentation reflects the rise of “vernacular witnessing” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013), where non-professional common people challenge dominant narratives through real-time visual storytelling. In Pakistan's context, this often occurs under risk, highlighting both the potential and precarity of digital visibility (Baig, 2021), as happened in some of the previous incidents.

4.4 Platform Affordances and Tactical Engagement

SNS provides users in coercive contexts to learn and adapt strategies according to platform-specific affordances (Velasquez and LaRose, 2015). The analysis shows that Twitter/X is mostly used to express dissent because of the anonymity of handles and the speed of real-time posting with reduced personal risk (Zhao, 2019). The TikTok videos construct resistance through text and visuals supported by the auditory mode. Users employ irony and humor to camouflage meanings beneath light-hearted trends, sometimes humorously, showing them as “ambivalent memes” posts that can be interpreted depending on the viewer's perspective and contexts (Milner & Philips, 2017). While on Instagram, as the anonymity feature is lesser as compared to other platforms, users mainly rely on symbolic protest through minimalist visuals or record their dissent metaphorically (Hussain, 2020). Also, the findings show an increasing number of posts made by AI tools (e.g., voice modulation, deepfake), pointing out a new trend of automated and anonymized digital activism through the latest technologies, raising ethical and security concerns, especially disinformation (Eubanks, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). These tactics play a dual role; on one hand, they reflect what Costanza-Chock (2020) calls “design justice”, logic to serve the goals of marginalized voices, while on the other hand, they spread disinformation and misinformation in society.

4.5 Semiotic Tools: Irony, Metaphor, Emotion, and Symbolism

Semantic ambiguity is employed as a powerful tool to showcase resistance. The analysis reflects semiotic ambiguity as a central strategy. Irony, satire, and metaphor were used to encode dissent, simultaneously avoiding direct confrontation. This discursive strategy is particularly effective in contexts where speech is monitored or criminalized (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Common visual and textual metaphors included puppetry (to imply control), shattered clocks (to denote failed democracy), silenced mouths (censorship), and court scenes (compromised justice). These visuals and texts were often paired with emotional cues such as tears,



tightened lips, rolling eyes, and tied hands to mobilize affect and express solidarity in the face of oppression (Papacharissi, 2015; Highfield, 2016). These practices highlight shared visual and textual vocabulary of dissent and resistance, based on cultural intelligibility and common ideology rather than explicit language (Mouffe, 2013). This manifests as a hallmark of subtle, non-violent resistance in authoritarian and controlled digital spaces (Scott, 1990; Postill, 2014).

5. Discussion

The study focused on exploring the multimodal discursive strategies employed by social media users in Pakistan to construct non-violent resistance to authoritarian repression. The findings suggested that digital activism and social resistance are not only reactive but strategically adaptive, drawing on platform affordances, cultural semiotics, and affective engagement. Also, AI-based technological innovations have emerged as a tool to demonstrate resilience, while at the same time, they have enabled the authorities to curb dissent by using algorithms.

5.1 Rethinking Resistance in Hybrid Regimes

In the past few decades, Pakistan has been marked by the characteristics of a hybrid regime. It's a political system where democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian practices (Diamond, 2002). In such contexts, traditional resistance or democratic practices such as street protests, journalism, and party politics are often surveilled, criminalized, or brutally crushed through coercive measures (Baig, 2021). Consequently, social media emerges as both refuge and battleground, allowing people to engage in subversive expression under conditions of constraint.

The analysis demonstrates, through the lens of DRT and Multimodal analysis, this shift by foregrounding symbolic acts of resistance embedded in everyday life. In Pakistani SNS, this dissent manifests through memes, hashtags, video stories, and instantly shared videos and photos that repurpose entertainment, satire, humor, and aesthetics to challenge dominant narratives of authoritarian tendencies. Unlike formal protest movements that happened to be threatening, these social media posts often avoid confrontation with central organization or ideology, termed as “infrapolitics”, a kind of resistance beneath the surface of visibility (Scott, 1990).

5.2 Multimodality as Strategy

Multimodal communication that combines image, text, sound, and interaction is employed as a strategic tool. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argue, meaning-making in digital contexts is inherently multimodal, and users leverage this to embed critique in culturally resonant symbols. In repressive contexts, this layering enables resistance that is both expressive and deniable, allowing dissent to circulate while reducing personal risk.

5.3 Platform Affordances and Tactical Creativity

The tactical use of platform-specific features highlights how SNS users navigate digital spaces (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Twitter/X enables anonymity and real-time amplification, while Instagram helps users express dissent symbolically and aesthetically. TikTok’s algorithm, virality aspects, and remix features offer “memetic resistance” (Milner & Phillips, 2017), wherein humor, satire, irony, and popular culture mask deeper critique of authoritarian regimes. The platform's affordances also reflect that the digital world is not a neutral space but is shaped by corporate and political interests (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Resistance doesn’t only serve the purpose of opposing domination but also against platform logics that can suppress, depoliticize, or algorithmically obscure dissent (Tufekci, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The findings demonstrate that Pakistani SNS users utilise tactical creativity, bending these affordances to subvert both the state, their repressive tendencies and, innate power structures embedded in these social media platforms.

5.4 Visibility vs. Vulnerability: The Paradox of Digital Resistance

Digital activism and resistance in an authoritarian context are very paradoxical in nature. While visibility is one of the core features of resistance, it also increases the risk of exposure to surveillance, harassment, censorship, or arrest. Chouliaraki (2015) notes, digital witnessing often comes with emotional and political risks, particularly when content is traceable or linked to identifiable users. In societies like Pakistan, this complexity is acute. Although the platforms enable users to

communicate dissent, they are constantly negotiating risks. The technology-enhanced AI-based surveillance has exacerbated the risks through automated content flagging, face recognition, and behavioral profiling (Eubanks, 2018). It has led to a shrinking space for dissent, where even symbolic resistance becomes perilous. Yet again, the same technology has fostered novice forms of digital resilience.

5.5 The Ethical and Technological Futures of Resistance

The findings underscore the need for new interdisciplinary frameworks to theorize resistance in an AI-mediated digital ecology. As artificial intelligence increasingly mediates content moderation, platform curation, and surveillance, activists and researchers must contend with both the potential and peril of algorithmic systems (Zuboff, 2019). The major ethical issue is concerned with the utilization of AI tools by civic actors without reproducing the same extractive logics they seek to resist. Spreading disinformation and disseminating hatred are the major pitfalls that the SNS users need to avoid while maintaining non-violent resistance. Furthermore, the study echoes the need for a framework based on the needs of politically marginalized users in the development and governance of technology. In Pakistan and beyond, supporting non-violent digital resistance will require not just platform reforms, but policy, education, and infrastructure that prioritize democratic values in the face of both authoritarian regimes and algorithmic control.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study has examined how digital media platforms serve as spaces for non-violent resistance in Pakistan's increasingly authoritarian hybrid regime. Through a multimodal discourse analysis of social media content including memes, hashtags, videos, and citizen journalism, this study has shown that digital resistance is not only widespread but also strategic, discursive, and culturally embedded. The SNS users in Pakistan engage in symbolic, affective, and ambiguous forms of dissent. These forms of expression exploit the affordances of platforms like Twitter/X, TikTok, and Instagram, while also highlighting significant risks, including censorship, surveillance, and persecution. The SNS are critical spaces providing the opportunity of political engagement and expressing dissent in contexts where traditional ways of resistance are coercively suppressed. These spaces position users to strategically engage in implied multimodal forms of resistance while mitigating personal risks. Furthermore, semiotic tools such as irony, satire, metaphor, and symbolism play a crucial role in constructing critique that is both culturally resonant and politically potent. These tools facilitate resistance as reimagined in digital formats. The affordances and constraints of platforms shape the visibility, form, and circulation of resistance. The rise of artificial intelligence

and automated surveillance presents both opportunities and dangers for civic activism. While some AI tools can support anonymity and creative protest, others deepen state surveillance and algorithmic repression—raising urgent ethical and political concerns. In authoritarian contexts like Pakistan, these practices are not merely symbolic; they are essential acts of democratic expression, cultural memory, and political survival.

In the present era, where both repression and resistance are increasingly digital, understanding how citizens navigate, subvert, and remake these spaces is vital. The creativity and courage shown by Pakistani social media users underscore the resilience of civic voices under pressure. Their practices reaffirm that resistance does not always coerce, rather it can be expressed through memes, laughs, and masks, thus making it more enduring and lasting.

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