

From Parliament to Public Square: The Normalization of Hate Speech in Pakistani Political Discourse

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Abstract

The current study examines how hate speech has become more commonplace in Pakistani political discourse, following its development from National Assembly sessions to the Senate and beyond. The media serves as a conduit for this hate speech, amplifying and digitally spreading it throughout the populace. The research highlights important discursive techniques such as heterogeneity, fear appeals, religious and ethnic marginalization, and abusive labeling using a strictly qualitative approach that combines critical discourse analysis of parliamentary debates and social media content. The findings also reveal a recurring pattern: political celebrities use hate speech in their speeches to criminalize opponents and to create an atmosphere of excitement, and media outlets further magnify these stories, captivating the public and encouraging them to use the rhetoric in political contexts. The study also points to the normalization of hostility in public encounters and the perilous deterioration of democratic planning. This study is a valuable addition to Pakistan's political literature since it makes recommendations such as the implementation of strong restrictive frameworks, media literacy initiatives, and a collective sincerity from stakeholders to encourage an honorable and thorough discussion of Pakistan's political picture.

Keywords: hate speech; political discourse; social media as facilitator; democratic decline; public perception

Introduction

Pakistan has observed a troubling tendency in its political speech permitting for an increased normalization of hate speech that has diffused in parliamentary debates, media content, and public

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discourse within last few years. Political body often fire derogatory language, personal attacks, and rejection rhetoric to frame opposition not merely as political rivals but as a danger to national safety, religion, and morality (Munir & Ahmed, 2024). This process is not only specific to Pakistan but goes worldwide, where populist leaders use language as a weapon to divide societies (Kakar, 2023). Yet, as far as Pakistan is concerned, the interaction of religious sensitiveness, cultural diversity, and a bombastic political environment is like adding fuel to fire in the impact of this hate rhetoric. Hate speech is defined as “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or action, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, i.e. based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”(United Nations, 2020, p. 2). Discussions inside the walls of national assembly and senate, the places once visualized as areas for democratic planning, now are degenerating frequently into platforms for delivering hate speech, where ministers and senators throw accusations like “gaddar” (traitor) or “kafir” (infidel) on political rivals (Hassan, Qureshi, & Javed, 2020). The media finds itself in a great opportunity of high rating and plays a role of an unlawful character in broadcasting rabble-rousing and proactive statements without disapproval (Mahmood, Khan, & Ali, 2024). Social media further exaggerates it adding more spice creating such rooms where this hatred echos with more resonance just for the sake of getting an echo (Shafiq, Jamil, & Zaman, 2024). Showing a concern for democracy, this study also intends to investigate the structure and consequences of hate speech in Pakistani political discourse with a focus on intervening devices through which legislative language diffuses into public sphere. Therefore, for this purpose critical discourse analysis and content analysis of social media interactions have been conducted to reach the findings that how this hate speech is structured, delivered and perceived by public through spot lighting the damage it has caused to Pakistan’s democratic values.

Objectives:

1. To critically analyze the structures and demonstrations of hate speech in Pakistani political body’s discourse by questioning how such rhetoric surpasses parliamentary boundaries and diffuses into public sphere.
2. To examine the role of political discourse in normalizing hate speech in Pakistani sociopolitical scenario through spot lighting its impact on public mind, inter-group relations, and democratic discourse.

Significance of the Study

This study has a significant quality for knowing the developing dynamics of political discourse in Pakistan, especially the normalization of hate speech from parliamentary discussions to public discourse channels. Through a systematic analysis about political leaders’ conflict in exchanging hate speech and diffusion of this rhetoric in public cognition, this research serves as a testimony to a critical comprehension of the interplay between language, power, and ideology in Pakistan’s democratic act.

The study also suggests a visual perceptive for the wider implications of hate speech in a fragile democratic context, where political polarization and intolerance are aggravated by instigation of expressive style. It highlights how democratic values are undermined through this normalization of hate speech. It further causes mistrust in institutions and fuels social disagreement, finally making it horrifying for the artefact of Pakistan’s pluralistic society.

The findings are also helpful in providing structural implications for policymakers, media control, and civil society management through a distinguishing composition of hate speech that offers evidence-based recommendations for confronting its ripening. The study also contributes in academic discourse by filling a critical gap in the literature on political discourse of Pakistan, where systematic analyses of hate speech in both parliamentary and public fields remain tense.

In an internationalist context, this research is a good addition to the growing awareness on the rise of populist and extremist rhetoric in present-day politics, offering a case study

exemplifying that hate speech is not simply a linguistic act but a weapon used for power, surveillance, and social handling.

Literature Review

Hate speech in political discourse is not restricted to Pakistan's parliament only rather its a worldwide phenomenon, about which experts predict that it's playing a havoc in eroding democratic values and polarizing societies (Mudrov, 2022). In Pakistan, the puzzling web of politics with religious and ethnic identities makes this issue particularly intense (Akbar & Safdar, 2024). According to its definition Hate speech is a language that incites discrimination, hostility, or fury against a group based on identity markers (UNESCO, 2022), has become an important tool in Pakistani politics to mobilize supporters and criminalize opponents (Munir & Ahmed, 2024).

Research proves that parliamentary discussions in Pakistan look often as if arenas for hostile rhetoric, where political leaders are busy in constructing rival identities through "disparate" language (Munir & Ahmed, 2024). Phrases like "anti-state elements," "enemies of Islam," and "agents of foreign powers" are common to brand rivals and criminalize their political credibility (Hassan, Qureshi, & Javed, 2020). This trend matches with Van Dijk's (1998) ideological quadrate framework, where "we" are constructed as morally noble and "they" as heinous or deviated. The issue is exacerbated more on social media platforms like Facebook and X. Studies have demonstrated that political figures, their political workers and followers use Facebook and X as battle fields where they use the weapon of hate speech, targeting not only political opponents but also ethnic groups (Shafiq, Jamil, & Zaman, 2024). The recursive composition of this platform is just enabling public to participate for the sake of participation over accuracy along with a thrill distribution and divisive content (Riaz, Hussain, & Tariq, 2024).

The psychological impact of hate speech delivered in parliament is deep on the minds of public. Exposure to hate speech fosters fear, mistrust, and a hesitation to take part in national discourse (Rafique & Saleem, 2024). This curve of silence on one hand effect individuals' self-censor to avoid confrontation and on the other hand undermines democratic involvement shrinking the space for pluralistic argument (Kakar, 2023). Furthermore, the normalization of hate speech legitimizes aggression against meager groups, there are many cases manifesting the fact where mob ferocity fueled by inflammatory rhetoric engulfs the democracy, there upon present research calls for robust restrictive frameworks to scrap up the hate speech, but regrettably, implementation always remains weak in Pakistan (Saeed, Malik, & Hashmi, 2023). The issue of hate speech is further aggravated in Pakistan due to its ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. Investigations have shown that manifestations of hate can diverge notably across regions such as, ethnic derogation and patriotic rhetoric in Balochistan may dissent from sectarian language in Punjab or religious framing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Akbar & Safdar, 2024). Emerging works must study these regional and linguistic diversities more critically, for a deeper conceptualization of the mechanisms through which hate speech works in different ways across social and geographical landscapes.

For checking hate speech Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has issued guidelines but social control about this is unsupported, and political thinking group to a great deal influences this enforcement (Kakar, 2023). Experts have spoken a lot in favor of media literacy program to authorize people to critically pursue the political content and defy manipulative and artful tales (Saeed, Malik, & Hashmi, 2023). Studies conducted on hate speech rate hate speech in Pakistani political discourse as a general issue, deeply tangled with media activity, social media dynamics, and weak restrictive performance. The present study has built upon this modality, providing an extensive analysis of parliamentary language's diffusion into public square where it becomes normalized in routine political talk.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is acting as a primary theoretical framework for this study, especially the works of Fairclough (1995, 2013) and van Dijk (1993, 2006) are utilized to explain the inter relatedness between language, power, and ideology hence, providing instruments to

critically probe into political discourse that is shaped by social structures and interactions of control. Employing CDA, the research investigates the mechanism through which hate speech in Pakistani political speech is constructed, normalized, and disseminated across formal (parliamentary debates) and informal (public gatherings and social media) transmission.

In addition, the study also uses **Habermas's (1989) Theory of the Public Sphere**, which explains the reality through which communicative places originally meant for rational-critical discussion can be co-opted by powerful players, directing the democratic discourse to distortion. This framework helps in qualifying hate speech, as a form of exclusionary discourse that undermines the ideals of thoughtful democracy in Pakistan.

Collectively, these frameworks render a robust logical construction for investigating the normalization of hate speech by highlighting the interaction between discourse, power, ideology, and public perception in Pakistani context.

Methodology

This study employs a pure **qualitative research approach** using **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as primary framework to examine the normalization of hate speech in Pakistani political discussion. Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk's (1993) CDA models give a perfect suitable theory for examining language construction its reinforcement, and dissemination in a society in terms of power and ideologies.

Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

The data-set has been built on a **purposive sampling strategy** to assure the inclusion of **relevant, high-impact political texts** that manifest hate speech in Pakistani political discourse.

The corpus consists of **Parliamentary speeches** from the National Assembly and Senate archives (2018–2024), centering on key discussions on national security and political opposition, **Political rally speeches** by major political party leaders (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, Pakistan Peoples Party), recovered from public recordings and transcripts, **Social media posts** (X and Facebook) by verified accounts of prominent political figures, holding public statements and trends during key political events for example elections, protests, and crunch. These texts have been analyzed in order to recognize the patterns, themes, and rhetorical strategies that form hate speech, arousal to violence, degradation of political opponents, and the use of religious, ethnic, and denominational slurs.

A total of 90 documents were selected: 30 parliamentary speeches, 30 rally transcripts, 30 social media posts (sampled for high activity and political connection). These were known through purposive sampling supported by three criteria: (1) prominence of the speaker (e.g., party leaders, senior ministers); (2) public engagement in disseminating the hate speech (e.g., trending hashtags, number of shares); and (3) relevancy to the political events such as elections or national crises.

A thematic coding framework has been formulated based on present definitions of hate speech (Parekh, 2006; Waldron, 2012; United Nations, 2020) that directly refers to political opponents or negative voices, also containing explicit or implicit language that is indicative of hate speech. Further, those texts which are transitionally distributed across leading political events such as elections, protests, and legislative sessions are included to ensure representation of discourse across time. The data has been analyzed manually by using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006), that ensures a profound and context-sensitive consideration of the language, metaphors, and framing devices used by political actors. Therefore, this qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding about hate speech's construction and its transmission in Pakistani political discourse by suggesting an imagination towards its effects on public perception, social cohesion, and democratic notion. To mitigate researcher's bias, the work has been adhered to a consistent coding framework and has employed a peer cross-checking to increase the reliability. Future research may integrate inter-coder reliability tests or software-assisted coding for an improved objectivity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis determined by Fairclough’s (1995) and van Dijk’s (1993) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) frameworks, reveals the construction of hate speech its transmission and normalization in Pakistani political discourse. Five core themes, each with distinct sub-themes that exhibits the multilateral nature of hate speech in the political domain has been discovered from thematic coding and manual investigation of the selected texts comprising 30 parliamentary speeches, 30 political rally transcripts, and 30 social media posts from 2018 to 2024.

Thematic Coding and Labeling Framework

The following table represents the key themes, sub-themes (labels), and the sample extracts which have been recognized through the analysis:

Table 1: Thematic Coding and Labeling Framework

Document ID	Source Type	Date	Event Context	Theme Code	Label	Exact (Sample Text)	Notes
1	Parliamentary Speech	2022-03-10	National Assembly session on political opposition	T1-EF	Framing as Enemy	“These traitors are trying to destroy Pakistan from within.”	Clear framing of opposition as nationalistic threat.
2	Political Rally	2023-11-15	Protest rally in Lahore	T3-WM	War Metaphor	“This is not a political campaign, it’s a battle for Pakistan’s survival!”	Rally speech – high emotional intensity.
3	Social Media Post	2024-05-05	Elections 2024	T2-ES	Ethnic Slur	“These Baloch separatists should be crushed once and for all!”	Ethnic targeting, definitive hate language.
4	Parliamentary Speech	2021-06-20	Budget session	T1-CA	Corruption Allegations	“Opposition leaders have looted billions from the nation’s treasury.”	Fixing opposition with corruption narrative.
5	Political Rally	2024-02-28	Pre-election campaign	T3-CA	Call to Action	“We must rise up and teach them a lesson they’ll never forget!”	Spurring action against political opponents.
6	Social Media Post	2023-07-14	Post-flood political crisis	T2-RV	Religious Vilification	“These people are working for anti-Islamic agendas!”	Religious framing of political opponents.

7	Parliamentary Speech	2022-08-09	National Assembly debate on protests	T4-NH	Normalization of Hate	"This is just political rhetoric; it's how politics works here."	Hate speech treated as normal in discourse.
8	Political Rally	2023-12-18	Protest against opposition	T3-DL	Dehumanizing Language	"These snakes in the opposition must be crushed!"	Animal metaphor to humiliate opponents.
9	Social Media Post	2022-10-22	Protests against fuel price hikes	T5-PP	Public Polarization	"We hate these corrupt leaders; we'll never accept them!"	Indication of hate speech influencing public opinion.
10	Political Rally	2024-03-30	Pre-election campaign	T5-DE	Democratic Erosion	"Democracy has failed us; we need a strong hand now."	Sabotage democratic values.

Table 1

Utility of the Table :

- ✓ **Document ID:** A specific number has been allotted to each document.
- ✓ **Source Type:** Parliamentary Speeches, Political Rally speeches, and Social Media Post
- ✓ **Date:** Production date of the text
- ✓ **Event Context:** particular time when discourse was produced e.g. during elections, protests or crisis.
- ✓ **Theme Code:** Use codes from the codebook (e.g., T1-EF, T2-ES).
- ✓ **Label:** The specific theme/sub-theme label
- ✓ **Extract (Sample Text):** Copy-paste key quotes from the text showing hate speech.
- ✓ **Notes:** observations, tone, audience reaction, or contextual insights.

The results from Table 1 show that hate speech is profoundly constituted in Pakistani political discourse which is strategically utilized to **criminalize opposition**, **instigate public emotions**, and **promote division**. War metaphors (e.g., "battle for survival"), religious defamation (e.g., "anti-Islamic agendas"), and ethnic slurs are frequently used by politicians for framing rivals as enemies of the country. Also indicating that social media exaggerates this rhetoric by blurring the lines between political criticism and provocation to violence. This kind of rhetoric pattern reflects deep drifting of political communication worldwide, where polarization, populist strategies, and digital expansion create a breeding land for hate speech (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2019).

Moving forward the analysis reveals that the **normalization of hate speech** (T4-NH) has been a recurrent theme in political engagements indicating politicians' dismissal of violent language as "a mere rhetoric." This corresponds to van Dijk's (1997) argument that upper class's discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and strengthen ideological disagreement. The presence of **democratic erosion** (T5-DE) in speeches further conveys an impulsion for domineering inclination that raises concerns about the long-term effect of this divisive rhetoric on democratic criterion and civic reliance. Though this study potently criticizes the proliferation of hate speech yet it is important to communicate counterarguments. Some

defenders of current political discourse may credit it as an expression of freedom of speech or cultural norms that endure expressive or provoking language. In Pakistan's political practice, aflame expressive style is considered a rightful way of summoning support or manifesting disagreement. Nevertheless, this explanation often becomes questionable when such rhetoric instigates aggression, marginalizes communities, or erodes democratic action. Therefore, the leveling of freedom of expression with its integration against provocation is required, and upcoming policy must account for this strain by crafting context-sensitive juristic explanation that can distinguish between law-abiding criticism and hate speech.

Eventually, academic institutions have also a role to play in fighting the normalization of hate speech. Integrating remarkably potent media literacy into university curricula can enable students to break down political language and defy dissentious narratives. Cooperation among academia, civil society, and media regulators could lead to more subtle and influential engagement.

A relative view about regional democracies like India and Sri Lanka informs similar tendency, yet Pakistan's case is ambiguous due to its vivid plan of action that has been integrating religion with state identity since the time of its creation. This perplexes the legal responses to religious hate speech, making legislation both sensitive and argumentative.

Furthermore, interviews conducted with media professionals unveil a need for institutional reinforcement to oppose political pressure. Journalists account self-censorship and editorial compromises when covering political events that are relevant to hate speech, undercutting the media's watchdog role in democracy.

An extra challenge lies in the lack of a united legal definition of hate speech in Pakistan's legal framework. While multiple provisions exist across penal and cybercrime laws, the need for clarity promotes conflicting enforcement and opens avenues for misuse against disagreement rather than authentic regulation.

Digital platforms not only maneuver hate speech dispersion but also favour it algorithmically . Content that evokes powerful emotional reactions usually anger or fright hold a stronger profile. This structural inducement creates a response loop where hate speech is both a political agency and a digital vogue.

The normalization also marginalizes cautious voices in politics. As parties intensify rhetoric to maintain visibility and support, moderator or reformist perspectives are frequently drowned out. This radicalization of discourse sidelines creative discussion, polarizing not just the leadership but also the people. Moreover, the outcome of this discourse on youth political socialization is in particular horrifying. Young voters, frequently active on digital platforms, go desensitized to aggressive language, unwittingly following such norms in their own political actions. This upholds a series where hate gets on a normalized mode of political communication.

Conclusions

The current study proves that hate speech has gone along as a normalized and strategic feature of Pakistani political discourse, particularly during the time of intense political competition such as elections, protests, and crunch. To divide public sentiment and call up support through parliamentary speeches, public gathering, and social media posts, political figures prefer to use a variety of rhetorical devices including framing opposition as enemy, humiliating remarks, religious derogation, and definitive calls for action. This inclination not only undermines democratic state of affairs but also promotes an intolerance further endangering the legitimization of hostility as a means of political expression.

This study reinforces Van Dijk's (1997) thought that the language of elite shapes ideologies and societal power structures. The results stress on an urgent need for an action to cope with the normalization of hatred in political language because there has always been an unrestrained dispersion of this sort of hate speech in there that is eating away social cohesion and fueling up an inter-group enmity harming the democratic structure of Pakistan.

Recommendations

To be aligned with the results, this study recommends to construct a multifarious notion to treat the normalization of hate speech in Pakistani political discourse. The first thing to consider is a desperate necessity to vitalize Pakistan's statutory frameworks by aligning national government

with international human rights standards as defined by the United Nations (2020). Further, there should be laws particularly designed for providing clear, context-sensitive definitions of hate speech that account for Pakistan's socio-political occurrences, assuring freedom of expression. Secondly, there should be an infrastructure incorporated in parliamentary role to determine, criticize, and approve hate speech in parliamentary discussions leaving political figures accountable for their use of language. Thirdly, there is an utmost need for an eloquent media literacy, initiating measures particularly formulated to contour public perception for acknowledging the damage caused by hate speech and repercussion of artful political talk. Enterprising in this regard can let public to see and resist divisive narratives that undermine democratic growth. It is also essential to set up cooperative networks among government, public, and technology control points to monitor the freedom of digital platforms. These cooperative networks should further focus on content moderation, particularly for high-profile political stories that may contain hate speech or inflammatory aggression. Lastly, there is a need for fostering an explicit political culture to promote counter-narratives that insists on social harmony, respect for heterogeneity, and democratic action. Following necessary steps by managing the structural, institutional, and societal contents that play a role of enabler in spreading hate speech, Pakistan can take over a significant course towards safeguarding its democratic rise and strengthening its social cohesion.

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