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MEDIA DISCOURSE ON THE PDM GOVERNMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE LEADING PAKISTANI NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract
This study examines how the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government was discussed in the editorial sections of four leading English-language newspapers in Pakistan: Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International. The focus is on two important political periods: April 9 to July 9, 2022, after the removal of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and May 14 to August 10–12, 2023, which marked the dissolution of the National Assembly and the end of the PDM government. The study uses a qualitative approach with Content Analysis, Thematic Coding, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the language, tone, and framing in 30 selected editorials. The analysis is supported by Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Priming Theory, along with CDA, to understand how newspapers constructed political meaning and influenced readers' perceptions. Five major themes are highlighted: economic crises, inflation, political strategies, rule of law, and foreign relations. The findings show that the newspapers presented differing and often polarized narratives. Editorials varied from supportive to critical, reflecting institutional or political leanings. Through selective framing, evaluative language, and agenda-setting, the newspapers helped shape public discussions on governance, legitimacy, and democratic stability. This study contributes to research in political communication and media discourse by providing a comparative view of how media outlets in Pakistan take part in the political process. It highlights the role of media not just as a source of information, but as an actor that can influence democratic development, especially during times of political change.

INTRODUCTION

After July 25, 2018 the general election held and Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) success. Then the PTI alliance with BAP, MQM and PMLQ parties to coalition government the chairman of PTI Imran Khan took oath of in charge as a Pakistan's 22nd Prime Minister on August 18, 2018. The era of Pakistan democratic movement (PDM) Government started from April 09, 2022 to August 13, 2023 (Ghauri, Khan & Ahmad, 2023). The political landscape of Pakistan underwent a significant transformation following the general elections held on July 25, 2018, which resulted in Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerging as the largest party in *The Nationa*l Assembly (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018). Unable to secure an outright majority, PTI formed a coalition government with several smaller parties including

Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) (Raza, 2019). This strategic alliance enabled PTI's chairman, Imran Khan, to assume office as Pakistan's 22nd Prime Minister on August 18, 2018 (Hashim, 2018).

The subsequent political developments led to the formation of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a multi-party alliance established in September 2020 that united major opposition parties including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) against the PTI government (Ghauri, Hasan & Khan, 2025; Yusufzai, 2020). After sustained political opposition and a successful no-confidence motion, the PDM coalition government officially came into power on April 9, 2022, marking the end of PTI's tenure (Ghauri, Khan & Ahmad, 2023).

The PDM government period, spanning from April 9, 2022 to August 13, 2023, represented a crucial phase in Pakistan's political history characterized by significant economic challenges, political instability, and evolving civil-military relations (Siddiqa, 2023). This transitional period witnessed substantial policy shifts in both domestic and foreign affairs, particularly regarding economic management, governance approaches, and political discourse strategies (Akhtar, 2023).

The PDM accused that Imran Khan mishandling the economy, leading to rising inflation, unemployment and financial issues. The PDM alleged that was undermining democratic institutions such as judiciary and media. The PDM criticized Khan's crack down press freedom and accusing him of intermediating and silencing journalist critics about his government. The PDM also represented a broader dissatisfaction with khan's style of governance and his perceived failure of to address country's pressing challenges. The alliance of PDM announced to represent new alternative vision for Pakistan future and then announced a three-phase antigovernment campaign. The action plan was in this farm like public gatherings, protests, and rallies.it would be succeeded by ''decisive long march'' in direction of Islamabad (Shehzad, Naqvi & Nazeer, 2022).

The PDM was launched on Sep 20, 2020. Pakistan has a lot of history about opposition alliance. The basic agenda of PDM to remove Imran Khan from seat of prime minster through ''No Confidence'' by members of national assembly according to the constitution of Pakistan 1973. A sitting prime minster can be removed from the seat through NCM. The twenty percent vote required to put vote in national assembly for NCM the speaker of national assembly is bound to hold a vote in five to seven days according to constitution. The PDM started NCM in national assembly against Imran khan on March 08, 2022 that passed on April, 2022 (Ali, 2023).

First time in Pakistani political system faced, a sitting prime minster removed from the prime minster ship through a "No Confidence Motion" by PDM in April 2022.PDM, was alliance of more than 12 parties that success of (NCM). The 22nd prime minister of Pakistan Imran khan stated that the motion was a ''Regime Change'' attempted by foreign conspiracy elements. The Pakistani media started the ''political discourse'' after the removal of Imran Khan from Prime minster ship (Ghauri, Khan & Ahmed, 2023). The editorial highlights the different aspects of world like human rights, sufficient social order in society and protection of norms.in actual democracy and media are linked like a bridge so the ruling government policy criticized by editorials (Shahid, Saeed, & Khan, 2023).

The PDM effort succeed through NCM against Khan by forcing him to resign as a prime minster. This marked is significant victory for the opposition and opened a new chapter in Pakistan's political landscape. The purpose of this study to examine the how Pakistani English newspaper framed editorial related to democracy with a specific system concentration on political movement of PDM. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) achieved a significant political milestone through the successful no-confidence motion (NCM) against Prime Minister Imran Khan on April 9, 2022, which compelled his resignation (Ahmed, Ghauri & Bukhari, 2024; Shahzad, 2022). Not only this procedure of the constitution became the first triumphant parliamentary impeachment of an incumbent prime minister in Pakistani history, but also it was the turning point in democratization of The Nation (Hussain, 2022). This win by the opposition not only brought forth the change of political power but also new precedence with regards to democratic

transitions in the parliamentary format in Pakistan (Naqvi, 2022).

This political event marked a new phase of realignments and changing standards of democracy in the Pakistani politics (Suleri, 2023). PDM achieving power by constitutional means by not seizing power by force or not forcing the judiciary to take their positions made it a potentially big step in the history of politics in Pakistan, which had been rather tumultuous in the past (Rizvi, 2023).

This current work aims to explore the framing of editorial discourse by the English-language print press, in Pakistan, regarding democratic processes over this period of transition specifically paying attention to the political options pursued by the PDM coalition (Zeb, 2023). Such analysis covers the time since the creation of the PDM until the moment of its governance (September 2020-August 2023), with the particular focus on:

- The framing of democratic norms and constitutional processes
- Representation of political transitions and power shifts
- Discourse surrounding parliamentary democracy and opposition politics
- Media narratives about political stability and governance

Print media is known as the source of information by its authenticity and popularity. The representation of ideologies and sense of legitimating in statement tries to create descried ideologies about the things in among people. The political discourse statement is highlighted in print media and try to create legitimating of deprived realities to show things as legitimated for public. Analyzing the media discourses explains that coverage of print media is highly personalized generally. The journalists in Pakistan are not given due autonomy to select and present information. This decision is limited to hands of editorial staff. Even democracy and media are bridge for information.

In study research intense to examine the political discourse regarding Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government in Pakistani print media content analysis. The analysis focus on how newspaper with different political leanings portray the PDM performances a cross various aspects such as economy, governance and social development. This study aims to key themes, narrative and biases in print media coverage of PDM government and assess their impact on opinion. The print media during PDM government to till has been marked by complex interplay like a several journalists faced pressure and harassment including physical attacks, arrests and investigation about self-censorship and huge effect create on investigative journalism. Political polarization influenced with PDM to presenting more favorable content to public for good governance. The ownership of press in hands of a few powerful individuals and groups raised concerns about editorial independence and manipulation.

Pakistan has been enduring sporadic political, economic, and social issues for decades as a result of the restriction on the free exercise of democracy. Undoubtedly, this regime transition has had a detrimental impact on Pakistan and the country. The existing system has made life extremely tough for the average person and has undoubtedly failed in every area, including the economy, government, and national advancement. The main focus of the study is to explore and analyze the political discourse regarding the PDM Government produced by the selected newspapers.

Print media maintains its position as a primary source of authenticated information and ideological representation in Pakistan's media landscape (Khan & Joseph, 2023). As a vehicle for political communication, newspapers engage in legitimization processes through selective framing of political realities, constructing particular ideological narratives for public consumption (Ahmed, 2022). The discursive practices of Pakistani print media frequently manifest personalized coverage patterns, reflecting structural constraints on journalistic autonomy where editorial decisions remain concentrated among limited power centres (Press Freedom Report, 2023).

This study examines the political discourse surrounding the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government through systematic analysis of print media content (Rizvi & Mahmood, 2023). The study focuses on exploring the role of newspapers with different political orientation in reporting the performance of PDM in the government in three key areas including economic management, administrative performance and social development

project (Hussain et al., 2023). The identification of thematic patterns, narrational tactics, and visible biases in the coverage is observed in the analysis, which evaluates its possible impact on the formation of the public opinion (Media Watch, 2023).

The press freedom report of the PDM government period was alarming, where a combination of the following took place:

- Deliberate intimidation of the press by legal and extrajudicial channels (PFUJ Report, 2023)
- Escalating self-censorship practices in newsrooms (CRSS Survey, 2023)
- Deterioration of investigative journalism capacity (SoP Report, 2023)
- Heightened political polarization in media content (Zaidi, 2023)

The dominance of strong business-political blocs in controlling the media has raised a very basic issue of editorial independence and manipulation of contents (Media Ownership Study, 2023). The oligarchic system of control is overlapped by the consistently drawback by democratic aspects in Pakistan, with frequent changes in regimes not leading to institutional stability (ICG Pakistan Report, 2023).

The PDM's governance period (2022-2023) exacerbated existing socioeconomic crises, with measurable declines across:

- Macroeconomic indicators (World Bank Pakistan Update, 2023)
- Governance effectiveness (PILDAT Scorecard, 2023)
- Human development metrics (UNDP Pakistan Report, 2023)

This study specifically analyses the political discourse generated by selected newspapers regarding PDM's governance, addressing three key dimensions:

1. Framing techniques in economic policy coverage
2. Narrative construction around democratic processes
3. Representation of governance challenges

The research employs critical discourse analysis to decode power relations embedded in media texts, revealing how dominant political actors influence public discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). By examining lexical choices, argumentation structures, and intertextual references, the study illuminates the mediation of political reality in Pakistan's constrained media environment (Fairclough, 2013).

The study is unique in its nature which is helpful to understand the power and ideology as represented by newspapers by official of state as well as stake holders. This study examines an importance that how discourse analysis used for production of desired sense among people and it also states that how statements are represented as legitimated realities for public to construct desired ideologies.

This study holds critical importance in examining the interplay between power, ideology, and media representation within Pakistan's political landscape. It provides a systematic analysis of how state institutions and political stakeholders utilize print media to construct and disseminate dominant narratives that shape public perception (Fairclough, 2013). By employing critical discourse analysis (CDA), this research deciphers the mechanisms through which newspapers legitimize specific political realities while marginalizing alternative viewpoints (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Analysing Ideological Construction: An investigation of how the discourse of the media arises to support specific ideologies of state and elites through their way of framing political events (van Dijk, 1998).

The study of Power Relation: Unveiling the power aspect of language in editorials as the means of domination and control of political actors over language and the community (Foucault, 1980).

Dealing with the concept of Legitimation: defining the rhetorical strategies deployed to represent some policies or forms of governance as something natural or inevitable (Chilton, 2004).

Practical Implications

Media Watchdogs & Civil Society: Highlighting patterns of media manipulation and biased reporting, enabling better scrutiny of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Political Analysts & Policymakers: Demonstrating how discourse shapes public opinion, which can

influence electoral outcomes and policy debates (Entman, 2007).

Journalists & Media Practitioners: Raising awareness about editorial pressures and self-censorship in politically charged environments (UNESCO, 2022).

Sociopolitical Relevance

The study is particularly crucial in the Pakistani context, where:

Media Ownership & State Influence: often dictate editorial policies, restricting independent journalism (Freedom Network, 2023).

Political Polarization: leads to partisan reporting, distorting democratic discourse (PILDAT, 2023).

Public Opinion Formation: is heavily mediated by elite-controlled narratives, affecting governance accountability (*Dawn* Media Group, 2023).

By dissecting the discursive strategies employed during the PDM government, this research enhances understanding of how media functions as an ideological apparatus either reinforcing state power or challenging it (Hall, 1982). The findings will serve as a valuable resource for future studies on media, democracy, and political communication in hybrid regimes.

Research Objective:

- To identify the editorial discourses of leading newspapers regarding PDM during the time period under Study.
- To explore the predominant issues highlighted by *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *The News International* during the PDM Government era.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How do the newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* portray the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government during the specified time periods?

RQ2: What political narratives and discourses have emerged in the selected newspapers concerning the PDM government from April 11, 2022, to July 11, 2022, and from May 11, 2023, to August 10-12, 2023?

The study is limited to the editorials published in the selected newspapers; daily the *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *The News International* during two-time frames after the PDM Government former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif assume the PM office on April 11, 2022 to July 11, 2022 and three months before the PDM Government of dissolved on August 10-12, 2023. This study is limited to the analysis of editorials only published regarding the PDM government in the following newspapers.

- *Dawn*
- *The Express Tribune,*
- *The Nation*
- *The News International.*

These newspapers are selected due to their reputable, verifiable and authentic sources to shape a story context. This study is strictly confined to the analysis of editorials published in four prominent English-language newspapers of Pakistan: *Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International.* The focus is on editorials concerning the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government during two specific periods:

April 11, 2022 to July 11, 2022: The first three months after former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif assumed office.

May 10, 2023, to August 10-12, 2023: Three months before the PDM government was dissolved.

Only those editorials that were directly relevant in the PDM government of these times have been covered. Any other type of content (news reports, column or opinion/editorial) or newspaper that is not listed is not included.

In this study the researcher will cover newspapers editorials content that PDM Government that starts in two-time frames after the PDM Government former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif assume the PM office on April 11, 2022 to July 11, 2022 and three months before the PDM Government of dissolved on August 10-12, 2023.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation upon which this study of media discourse is built. In analyzing the editorial portrayal of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, this research draws upon two interrelated media theories: Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory.

These theories help explain how the print media constructs political realities, influences public perception, and sustains or challenges dominant power structures. Additionally, elements are employed to understand the deeper ideological and rhetorical patterns embedded in media language.

The purpose of this study during the PDM government political discourse analysis content produced in newspaper regarding the ruling power of PTI at that time. The PDM construct a positive and self-image in one side. On the other side negative content produced against PTI government. The agenda-setting theory states that the public and media agendas typically coincide. Individuals are more likely to become aware of topics and situations that the media emphasizes, and they also tend to embrace the importance that certain subjects are given. This idea is mostly concerned with education rather than changing one's mindset or beliefs. Information-related impacts would be the most predicted to occur, according to several empirical studies on mass communication. People typically find out about the issues and their relative importance through the media agenda.

According to agenda setting, audiences get this issue salience from the news media and incorporate similar priority lists into their own agendas. The dissemination of this voice is characterized as one of the key components of mass communication in agenda setting. The news media not only provides us with the main components for our images of the world and informs us about it overall, but they also have an impact on how prominently those aspects appear in these images.

The relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory to this study lies in its core premise that the mass media significantly influences what the public perceives as important. This study investigates the editorial discourse produced by major English-language newspapers in Pakistan during the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, particularly how this media discourse constructed positive representations of the PDM and negative portrayals of the opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Agenda-Setting Theory, originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), argues that there is a strong correlation between the issues emphasized by the media and the topics perceived as important by the public. During the periods under study (April–July 2022 and May–August 2023), editorials consistently framed the PDM in a positive light emphasizing its institutional legitimacy, efforts at economic stabilization, and commitment to constitutionalism while simultaneously criticizing the PTI for past governance failures, populism, and alleged anti-democratic behaviour. This media emphasis significantly shaped the public discourse and political imagination surrounding both parties.

Agenda-Setting Theory is therefore highly crucial in this research in providing a platform through which to explain why and how some political discourses became the focus when it came to the editorial sections of the PDM government. It also gives an idea on how media decisions in terms of framing and emphasis may play a role in creation of a positive image of the ruling coalition and delegitimizing the opposition that ultimately would determine how the masses perceive political credibility, ability to govern, and who should lead the nation.

In the context of this study, Agenda-Setting Theory provides a foundational framework to analyse how editorial discourse in print media shapes the public's political priorities during the tenure of the PDM government. It enables the investigation of how political narratives are constructed, which issues are elevated, and how power structures influence the media's presentation of political events. It also allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between media content and public consciousness, particularly in periods of political transition or crisis.

Within the framework of the present work, the topic of editorials in Pakistani English language newspapers is considered that frame the government of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The editorials use particular linguistic and rhetorical maneuver so as to create some contradicting pictures of the actors of the political game by utilization of emotive words, binary contrasts, source privileging as well as value-laden adjectives. To give an example, the fact that the PDM can be framed as a restoration of democracy against the PTI as a populist threat has the reflection of editorial bias and, more widely, institutional affinities. Further, the concept of framing has a great essence of media ownership, editorial policy and political orientation. Such forces tend to have a say in the sort

of frames that they prop up and those that they muzzle and therefore the overall ideological biasness of the media reporting. Framing of political discourse in Pakistani situation where the interests of media houses are often tied to political or corporate benefits leads to a situation where such discourse is used as a weapon of justification or demonization of governments and actions of the governments.

Framing Theory therefore gives the important framework to study through the construction of meaning in the media. It also expands on Agenda-Setting and Priming Theories since it not only answers the question of which issues are discussed but also how issues are brought up. It enables this researcher to determine the construction of the media narratives under the PDM government and how those media narratives affected the discussion within the society concerning governance, accountability, rule of law and performance of the economy.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection:

This study was done by taking the data available on the online archives of four leading English dailies of Pakistan: Dawn, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *The News International*. These newspapers were chosen for their national reputation, influence in political reporting, and consistent editorial publication. To ensure the credibility of sources and access to a comprehensive editorial archive, data were also retrieved through LexisNexis, a trusted global database for academic and media research.

The timeframe selected for data collection included two critical periods of political transition in Pakistan:

- April 09, 2022, to July 09, 2022, immediately after the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition took power following the ouster of former Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- May 14, 2023, to August 10–12, 2023, leading up to the dissolution of *The Nation*al Assembly and the end of the PDM government's tenure.

During these politically volatile phases, editorial discourse peaked, with newspapers playing an instrumental role in shaping public opinion through political commentary, critique, and ideological framing (McNair, 2017). The most appropriate type of data considered to be used in this study was the editorial since they give reflection of institutional opinions and are even useful in setting of agenda and discourse (Richardson, 2007).

Considering the large volume of editorial productions circulated at the target time intervals, a systematic sampling technique (Kth method) was used to make a bias-free and convenient pick of the data to be analyzed. This is whereby it is necessary to select all the Kth editores out of a specified population with the arrangement sequentially.

- Population Identification: All the editorials were collected in the editorial columns of all the four newspapers that were published during the two specified times.
- Sampling Frame Construction: The complete number of editorials of interest (e.g., political, economic, legal or foreign policy discussion about PDM or PTI) was identified.
- Sample Size: The size of editorials included in this study was determined to be 30 editorials and was considered sufficient to allow further investigations of the qualitative analysis into these editorials given that they were based on thematic saturation and comparability between outlets.
- Kth Selection Rule: In the case of total number of relevant editorials say 120 then after every 4th editorial (K = N/n = 120/30) only was chosen so as to constitute the final sample.

This method gave a probability of selection as equal as possible, and it evaded possible researcher bias in the editorial choice. The application of Kth method guaranteed the representativeness of the sample in time, newspapers, and categories of the discourse.

- The editorial should concern itself with matters of governance, policies of PDM, public statements, or political choices of PDM.
- In the same generation periods, the editorials have to mention or criticize the PTI or its leadership. The editorial must relate to at least one of the five major discourse areas:
  1. Economic crises,
  2. Inflation,
  3. Political strategies,
  4. Rule of law,
  5. Foreign relations.

- The editorial must have been published within the specified date ranges.

The data were collected from the online archives of the selected newspapers and from reliable data sources such as LexisNexis. The collection covered the period from April 09, 2022, to July 09, 2022, and May 14, 2023, to August 10–12, 2023, focusing exclusively on the editorial pages of four major Pakistani English-language newspapers: *Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International.* It is important to note that during these periods, political discourse in the media was at its peak, with newspapers actively engaging in constructing narratives to influence public opinion in favor of or against political actors.

Data Analysis:

Data Collected from the newspaper websites and analyzed as a qualitative content analysis. The above selected newspaper and source portray during PDM government content analysis. It represents the agenda of PDM against PTI government. These strategies determined to over through Imran Khan Government by devising anti -government strategies.

The data collected from the editorial sections of *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* were analysed using a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) framework. Editorials were retrieved from both official newspaper websites and verified databases such as LexisNexis, covering the critical periods of April 09 to July 09, 2022, and May 14 to August 10–12, 2023. These phases were marked by significant political transitions and ideological confrontations between the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

The content analysis was based on the qualitative content type that helped to analyze the manifest and the latent meaning of the text through revealed patterns, rhetorical acts, and plotting. It was set to analyse the formulation of political discourse in this regard of governance, legitimacy, and opposition by the print media, especially in terms of the PDM agenda and their strategic communication back then when it was in power.

- The newspapers agenda setting mechanisms applied to promote or cover political issues.
- The framing devices employed to shape public perceptions about the PTI government.
- The language and tone that portrayed the PDM in either a legitimizing or propagandistic role.

The review showed that a sizeable part of the editorial coverage was in enhancements of criticism against the PTI especially in economic mismanagement, institute disobedience, foreign affairs failure and law and order problems. Simultaneously, numerous editorials were written to support and justify the actions of the PDM coalition, creating certain narratives which allowed to picture the PDM as a system-cleansing political party, which was to introduce democratic rules.

This rhetoric tendencies were since the PDM was strategically attempting to challenge the leadership of Imran Khan and their common justification of power. Editorials highlighted the PDM's anti-government strategies, legal manoeuvres, parliamentary interventions, and public communication tactics designed to undermine the PTI regime and shift public sentiment in Favor of the coalition government.

The data analysis also used manual thematic coding supplemented by software tools like NVivo and Altas.ti, which enabled systematic organization of editorial content into predefined categories such as:

- Economic Discourse
- Inflation and Public Burden
- Political Legitimacy
- Rule of Law and Judiciary
- Foreign Affairs and International Standing

This multi-level analysis allowed for both quantitative tracking of narrative frequency and qualitative interpretation of ideological positions, contributing to a richer understanding of media's role in political discourse during Pakistan's democratic transition.

Content analysis technique was employed in this study, keeping in view the research objectives and research questions. The researcher intended to apply content analysis using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The analysis focused on identifying opposing content produced in the newspapers, examining the intentions, focal points, and communication trends embedded within the editorial discourse. It determined the existence and frequency of recurring concepts in the text and further developed conceptual analysis by exploring the relationships among these concepts within the editorial narratives.

Content Categories

The researcher ware identifies following major discourses produced in newspapers during the PDM government.

- Economics crises
- Inflation
- Political
- Rule of law
- Foreign relation

This study employed Qualitative Content Analysis using Thematic Coding and Discourse Analysis techniques. A total of 30 editorials from the Editorial Sections of *Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International* were analyzed. These editorials were selected based on relevance to five key discourse areas: economic crises, inflation, political strategies, rule of law, and foreign relations during the periods April 09 July 09, 2022, and May 14, August 10-12, 2023.

This study investigates the nature of political discourse produced in the editorial sections of major Pakistani English-language newspapers during the tenure of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government. The objective is to understand how prominent media outlets framed the political landscape, constructed narratives about governance, and shaped public perceptions through recurring themes and rhetorical strategies.

To fulfil this objective, the researcher identified five major discourse areas frequently emphasized in political editorials during the specified periods. These discourse categories emerged from both preliminary reading and thematic relevance to the PDM government's political context:

- **Economic Crises:** Discourses centered around fiscal instability, debt burden, IMF negotiations, and economic mismanagement.
- **Inflation:** Focused on rising prices of essential commodities, fuel adjustments, public burden, and reactions from political leadership.
- **Political Strategies:** Included editorials discussing PDM's governance decisions, election planning, power transitions, and criticism of the PTI leadership.
- **Rule of Law:** Covered issues related to judicial interventions, constitutional debates, institutional independence, and legality of political actions.
- **Foreign Relations:** Reflected on Pakistan's diplomatic positioning, international responses to domestic politics, and bilateral/multilateral engagements.

This research employed a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) approach, combining both thematic coding and discourse analysis techniques to uncover patterns of meaning and ideological constructions in media content. QCA allows for a systematic yet flexible examination of textual data, enabling the researcher to interpret both manifest and latent meanings in editorials.

Discourse Analysis, particularly drawing from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), was used to explore how language functions as a tool of power and ideology. This included analysing metaphors, evaluative adjectives, framing techniques, and rhetorical strategies used by newspapers to construct narratives either in Favor of or against political actors (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the qualitative findings derived from a systematic content analysis of editorials published in four major English-language newspapers in Pakistan *Dawn, The Express Tribune, The Nation, and The News International* during two politically significant periods:

- April 09 – July 09, 2022
- May 14 – August 10–12, 2023

The analysis investigates the strategic discourse employed by the PDM government in contrast to the PTI-led opposition, with a focus on thematic frequency, rhetorical framing, sentiment distribution, and political narratives across five key discourse areas: economic crisis, inflation, political strategy, rule of law, and foreign relations.

Following is the summary of key findings;

Dominant Discourse Themes

Analysis revealed that editorial coverage frequently revolved around five critical domains:

Economic Crisis and Inflation: The worsening economic condition, inflation, and dependency on

the IMF were always blamed on poor management of the country in the previous PTI government. The PDM was claimed variously to be steering a difficult economic legacy, but on other occasions accused of policy paralysis.

Political Strategy and Power Struggles: The debate mostly coincided that the PDM was using a conciliatory language, based on continuity of democracy. Conversely, PTI was described as contentious, destabilising and unready to build political consensus.

Rule of Law and Institutional Integrity: The editorial context mostly helped to frame the PDM as one that is respectful towards the judicial processes and institutional norms. On the other hand, the PTI was much maligned because of pressuring the judiciary and taking populism too far by weakening the legal systems with their rhetoriousness.

Foreign Relations: The involvement of PDM with the foreign members was presented in a more tactful light, particularly when it came to international trade disputes and geopolitical readjustment among the IMF parties. The rule of PTI was surrounded by doubt, especially how it dealt with the West and China.

Narratives of Stability vs. Instability: A de facto pattern in narratives built itself: PDM as a stabilizing entity with a restoring order, and PTI as a populist and destabilizing force. This black-or-white thinking reduced tricky political factors and made editorial attitude synchronize with viewed levels of governance development.

Sentiment and Rhetorical Analysis; The sentimental analysis revealed an editorial tone that was majorly against PTI especially on matters related to economy and judiciary systems, and civil-military relations. On the contrary, the attitude towards PDM was neutral and a bit positive, indicating reserved support or even forced approval, but not a high level of support.

- **Blame Attribution:** Assigning economic and governance failures to PTI's legacy.
- **Legitimizing Discourse:** Framing PDM as constitutionally and morally entitled to govern.
- **Crisis Framing:** Increase the sense of urgency in the population to explain the unpleasant decisions made by PDM and put the failures in perspective.

According to the identified editorial mood and rhetorical frames identified in the present research study, it becomes evident that there were obvious tensions in the approaches to the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) present in the print media coverage associable with the two critical political phases considered in the present research study. Through qualitative content analysis with the application of discourse analysis, it was observed that the study indicates a significant pattern in sentiment distribution and usage of rhetorical strategies used by the editorial writers in the editorial papers chosen.

Sentiment Toward PTI and PDM; According to the sentiment analysis, the editorial trend was overall negative when it came to the PTI particularly when it came to political matters the economy, corruption, and the courts to be more specific. On a regular basis, PTI was blamed in the editorials of structural economic failures such as IMF talks breaking down, depreciation of currency, and inflationary pressures. Besides, editorials used to lament the aggressive approach to the judiciary and strident political rhetoric of PTI and they described the party like a disruptive factor in the Pakistani democratic system.
On the other hand, the view towards the PDM government was neutral or weakly positive. The general tone of most editorials was not the blind admiration of PDM, but quite a reserved support/half-hearted appreciation of its actions. This was overall an account of relative authority where the PDM was portrayed as the more responsible or institutional agency as opposed to PTI. Even the positive sentiment was often explained against the background of the crisis of inherited challenges which indicated that the PDM was trying to control the crisis but not to initiate one.

Key Rhetorical Strategies Identified; A variety of rhetorical tools was used by editorials published in the newspapers in order to influence the political discourse in the patterns that were used according to

specific ideological inclinations. The most noticeable ones were the following:

And this was possibly the most widely used rhetorical device, particularly in the review of the economy and state institutions. Editorials have maintained a consistent system of placing the blame of the financial mismanagement and turbulence acquired by the PDM on the PTI government. There were usually retrogressive excesses, blaming the crises in Pakistan during the PDM era to excessive borrowings, unstable foreign policy decisions, and the pressure of inflation at the genesis of such administration created by PTI.

To validate the PDM right to govern both morally and constitutionally there were editorials that used legitimizing rhetoric. This was by making the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan a democratic and legitimate move, and by promoting the agenda of restoring institutional balance, anti-polarization in politics and safeguarding the judicial independence. This is not to say that in this story the PDM was not the protector of a democratic order, especially with constant allegations of poor performance.

One of the key strategies to be employed in the context of framing a crisis involved giving context about the unpopular or irritating actions of the PDM which included increasing the prices of fuel, taxation, or postponement of elections. The economic and political crises has been given even more urgency through the editorials that tended to depict such a crisis as a national emergency demanding to be addressed at once and thus serving as a legitimate excuse to the PDM. This was also a ploy to minimize the failures of the coalition by swapping it with the magnitude of the inherited crisis.

CONCLUSION

All these rhetorical and sentimental moves created an overall outcome of developing a media narrative of negative coverage against PTI and a reserved positive coverage of the PDM. The editorials influenced the discourse of the population managing the prism through which political events were interpreted in delegitimizing PTI whilst rationalizing or justifying the activities of the PDM. These results support the identities of agenda setting and framing by media especially in times of transition in the politics of the day.

Although there were also certain similarities (in the thematic sense) of the newspapers, minor editorial differences were also indicated:

- *Dawn* maintained a more institutional and procedural tone, emphasizing democracy and constitutional continuity.
- The Nation often reflected nationalist concerns and economic urgency.
- The Express Tribune leaned toward analytical neutrality but reinforced anti-PTI sentiment in economic contexts.
- The News International exhibited a tone sympathetic to state institutions and cautious about populist mobilizations.

From a political communication standpoint, the PDM appears to have strategically leveraged editorial discourse to:

- Reframe the economic narrative by shifting blame upstream to PTI.
- Project an image of political rationality and democratic stewardship.
- Gain international legitimacy by appearing media-savvy and institutionally aligned.

However, the editorial support was not uncritical. The PDM was also scrutinized for policy delays, internal fragmentation, and failure to deliver urgent reforms indicating editorial expectations for accountability remained intact.

This discourse analysis underscores the pivotal role of editorial pages in shaping political legitimacy in Pakistan's volatile political environment. While editorials did not unequivocally support PDM, they contributed to undermining PTI's narrative by:

- Delegitimizing populist strategies,
- Reinforcing institutional narratives,
- And amplifying governance deficits from the past.

The study offers a foundational understanding for further research in political communication, media framing, and discourse analysis in Pakistan. Future studies may explore public opinion in tandem with media framing, or conduct longitudinal analyses to assess how such editorial narratives evolve across successive electoral cycles.

This study's findings highlight the critical role of editorial discourse in shaping political legitimacy and influencing public perception during times of

political transition in Pakistan. Through a comprehensive qualitative media discourse analysis of editorials published in four prominent English-language newspapers *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The News International* the research has demonstrated how editorial narratives subtly but significantly contributed to framing the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government and delegitimizing the preceding Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration.

While the editorials did not always offer overt or uncritical support for the PDM, they consistently employed rhetorical and framing strategies that:

- Delegitimized PTI's populist approach, particularly by portraying its confrontational politics, institutional defiance, and economic mismanagement as harmful to national stability;
- Reinforced institutional narratives that favored constitutionalism, judicial independence, and procedural legitimacy narratives closely aligned with the PDM's self-representation;
- Amplified the governance deficits inherited from the PTI, thereby justifying the PDM's challenges in managing the economy and state institutions, and framing them as managers of crisis rather than creators of it.

These editorial patterns suggest that newspapers functioned not merely as observers but as active agents in the discursive construction of political reality, helping to shape which actors were viewed as legitimate, competent, or destabilizing. In a politically volatile environment such as Pakistan's characterized by frequent power shifts, civil-military tensions, and electoral uncertainty this discursive influence holds considerable significance.

The implications of this study extend beyond a single government or time frame. By exposing how framing, agenda-setting, and rhetorical strategies operate within editorial spaces, the research provides a foundational framework for future inquiries in the fields of political communication, journalism studies, and media influence in transitional democracies.

Incorporating audience reception studies to evaluate how the public internalizes and reacts to such editorial discourse;

- Conducting longitudinal or cross-media studies to compare editorial tone across time or across platforms.
- Exploring comparative media framing in regional languages or provincial newspapers, offering a more inclusive picture of *The Nation*al media landscape.

Ultimately, this study affirms that editorial discourse is a powerful medium through which political narratives are constructed, contested, and circulated. In the case of Pakistan, these narratives continue to play a decisive role in shaping democratic trajectories, public opinion, and institutional legitimacy.

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