

**Electronic Crimes, Internet and Violence: Jama'at-e-Islami and the Progressive Civil Society of Pakistan**

Sajjad Hussain<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Ayub Jan<sup>2</sup>,  
Wajid Mehmood<sup>3</sup> & Muhammad Irfan Mahsud<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract**

This study explores the efforts of Jama'at-e-Islami to win new religiously popular support among the online population amidst the contesting voices from the progressive civil society of Pakistan. The study found that while trying to gain a religiously popular support through internet, a significant part of online message of the Jama'at-e-Islami constitutes anti-blasphemy material that reinforces some of the state regulatory measures for online surveillance. Passage of the 'Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act' in August 2016 with some of its provisions introduces stronger online surveillance and censorship "aimed" at the glory of Islam and integrity of the state. Several cases of prosecutions, detentions and violence for some online activities have since then been noticed. The study argues that a significant part of the Jama'at-e-Islami's online message reinforces these regulatory measures which tend to normalize internet in Pakistan.

**Key words:** Jama'at; progressive civil society; violence; regulatory control; internet's normalization

**Introduction**

The last decade of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of 'worldwide web' (www) and some enthusiastic speculations about its impact on politics, thus, claiming that representative democracy was going to be doomed dawning into the era of a "direct", "deliberative", and "participatory" democracy. It was, indeed, a radical view. Scholars upholding this view argued that new ICTs would lead to the demise of these institutions by de-institutionalizing them with the result being the hierarchies displaced by direct input from citizens (Rheingold, 1995; Lead beater & Mulgan, 1997; Morris, 1999). It was a radical view which last its much heralded significance when empirical evidence showed the decreased tendency of people in online politics (Norris, 2001). Another strand of the theoretical approaches in this regard was the 'level playing field' argument.

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<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, KPk. [sajjadhussain@uop.edu.pk](mailto:sajjadhussain@uop.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, KPk. [ayub@uop.edu.pk](mailto:ayub@uop.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, FATA University, FR Kohat, KPk. [wajid.mehmood@fu.edu.pk](mailto:wajid.mehmood@fu.edu.pk)

<sup>4</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Basic Science & Humanities, CECOS University, Peshawar, KPk. [irfanmahsud@cecos.edu.pk](mailto:irfanmahsud@cecos.edu.pk)

Central to this understanding was the idea that the internet would facilitate oppositional/outsider and fringe players to benefit the most from its use and present a challenge to the established political organizations. Operating in a communication environment made as a leveled playing field, the cyber environment thus offers opportunities to direct action campaigns, protest activity and transnational networks to organize and mobilize (Doherty, 2002). The thesis relied on the arguments such as less costs associated with the use of internet for organization and mobilization, disintermediation and a growing internet culture. The internet being a cheap publishing source as compared to the journalistic skills and costs required for printing or television channels (Ward & Gibson, 2009) significantly reduces communication and kicking off costs for the resource-poor networks and organizations (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). In comparison to the mass media where the small space and editorial control can easily edit out fringe concerns, the decentralized communication environment of the new media such as interactive websites, weblogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social network tools provide opportunities for small players to get their message across (Ward & Gibson, 2009).

Nonetheless, keeping into account the resilience and agency of the more established political organizations, some scholars came up with a skeptical and more critical view of the “level playing field” perspective.

According to this view, the internet does not favor alternative organizations of politics and hence it did not give rise to a new politics. Resnick (1998) put forward the idea that though in its initial stages’ internet could offer a level playing communication field in which new players got influence, however, gradually this sphere had been normalized. Thus, the established political interests were supposed to dominate the online environment as they did in other media. Four main assumptions were given to justify this thesis: commercialization, fragmentation, new skills and an increasingly regulatory control of the internet have led to its normalization (Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

### **Internet as a source of extending organizational influence**

Technically speaking, in comparison to the mass media, new ICTs offer political parties and organizations the opportunity to directly communicate both with the members and the specific target groups. Parties and organizations are in control of the content and dosage of the information that they disseminate without the traditional media bias. Internet may thus be a useful source for resource poor parties and organizations.

Moreover, new ICTs have been considered as sources for attracting new supporters for political organizations and also diversifying social base of

membership, bringing new life to traditional political organizations besides sustaining new political forms. Nonetheless, in the internet politics there is the debate that how different is the cyberspace for winning new support: is there an audience that cannot be reached through traditional media by the organizations? The interest in this debate is triggered by the observation that the so-called “digital natives” - mostly young and grown up in the age of computer technologies are difficult to reach through traditional media as using such technologies make an important aspect of their daily lives (Ward & Gibson, 2009: 28).

However, despite these advantages and potential opportunities for organizations to win additional support online, there is one potential challenge: that the internet is a “pull” medium as opposed to a “push” medium like offline media, which makes it hard to get one’s message across to a general and often more passive audience. A certain amount of political interest and pre-existing know-how are essentially required before visiting a website. Simply the availability of an organizational website does not make the apathetic visit it. As noted by several scholars, most of the politically active visit political sites which is a reinforcing tendency rather than mobilizing one (Norris, 2002; 2003; Gibson et al., 2003a; 2005). The ‘pull’ nature of the internet can mostly be associated with organizational websites. The availability of popular social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter somehow overcome this problem for the organizations. The application of theory of “weakening social boundaries” (Granovator, 1973) to the digital social networks helps us explain the widening of exposure to disagreement online (Brundidge & Rice, 2009). Therefore, the possibility for these contents to get across the apathetic lies in sharing them on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others, where there might be people apathetic to other political organizations (in our case Jama’at-e-Islami) befriended withits (Jama’at) associates in their digital social networks.

According to normative theory there must be a fair chance or level playing field situation on internet for all organizations/persons to present their views on socio-political and economic issues in accordance with their worldviews. However, as stated above, an increasing regulatory control among the other three factors that contributes to normalization of the cyberspace (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) may favor some organizations while disfavor the others. In Pakistan a number of regulatory controls have been implemented to check the activities of the civil society/activists online. Some of these controls favor a certain discourse e.g. curbing the issue of online blasphemy. Jama’at being upholding this slogan in their online narrative/discourse, this study argues, helps the state normalize the internet in Pakistan and gets the benefit to disseminate their message freely as compared to the dissenting voices from the progressive civil society online.

This study selected the case of Jama'at-e-Islami of Pakistan (hereafter referred to as Jama'at) being the most organized "Islamist" political party with well-organized social media and web communication teams from central through to regional to local levels. It evaluates their online efforts to win additional religiously popular support online amidst the contesting discourse (s) from the progressive civil society online

### **Ideology of the Jama'at**

The starting point of the Ideology of Maulana Mawdudi and hence by implication his Jama'at was that, "Islam is not a jumble of unrelated ideas and incoherent mode of conduct. It is rather a well-ordered system, a consistent whole, resting on a definite set of clear-cut postulates" (Mawdudi, 1960: 133). One of the basic postulates from which follows a logical order is the premise regarding the unity and sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over the entire universe and hence the political sovereignty lies with Him. If one accepts this premise, conclusion of the argument gives a logical and consistent philosophy of Maulana Mawdudi. This acceptance follows that God alone is the law-giver. This divine law has been provided to the humans through His book Quran and Sunnah i.e. the ideal demeanor exhibited by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to explain and exemplify the meanings of God's book. Therefore, no person or group of persons can independently legislate in any sphere of life (Bahadur 1977: 161). According to Mawdudi's philosophy both the State and *Din* (literally: religion) are one and the same thing because both entail obeying something superior as sovereign. The Islamic State, therefore, is opposed to any state which derives its sovereignty from the people for law-making. Hence, Islam has no roots of Western democracy. Maulana Mawdudi claimed that sovereignty of God and *Khilafat* (Vicegerency) of man are the foundations for the Islamic state. Islam, according to him, thus rejects the popular sovereignty (Mawdudi, 1960: 147).

### **Methodology and data**

This study uses a mixed method approach to study the phenomenon. It relies on both primary and secondary sources of data. For primary data, a first set of data was obtained by recording posts from the Jama'at's central Facebook and Twitter accounts and were analyzed. The authors selected the duration between two elections i.e. between 2013 and 2018 general elections. As such, we recorded posts and tweets from the Jama'at's central social media accounts in the month of July and August 2014; September and October 2015; and March and April 2016. These months were randomly selected through a random sampling technique in a way that each of the months had equal probability of being selected for the study. The contents from these accounts were carefully recorded based on their contents

and messages which represent online discourse/narrative of the Jama'at between two elections and not its online elections campaign strategy. A sample 600 posts from Facebook account and 600 tweets from its Twitter account were recorded<sup>5</sup>.

The second set of data comes from semi-structured interviews. Two lengthy semi-structured interviews were conducted by interviewing the central social media head of the Jama'at at Mansoorah, Lahore and Punjab chapter IT Manager of the Jama'at based at Mansoorah too.

The third set of data was derived from secondary sources e.g. books, research articles, reports and various online sources.

### **Jama'at's online message vis-à-vis the contesting voices from civil society online**

Posts and tweets which stand in contrast to that of progressive civil society's ones were related to anti-blasphemy campaign by Jama'at during this time. Jama'at uploaded 39 posts on Facebook regarding Mumtaz Qadri/anti-blasphemy and 27 in favor of the establishment of Islamic State/Iqamat-e-Din. Similarly, they tweeted 46 times in favor of Mumtaz Qadri/anti-blasphemy as compared to 34 tweets regarding establishment of Iqamat-e-Din/Islamic State. These data suggest that Jama'at's online narrative constitutes a significant part of material that opposes the narrative of the progressive civil society.

With the spread of internet services to Pakistan and especially with the availability of web 2.0, there are certain challenges that still hinder the progress of Jama'at towards a stable public opinion in favor of Jama'at and its ideational framework/narrative. The presence of civil society on the internet and their mobilization tactics online offer a serious challenge in this regard. For example, the demonstrations against the Facebook authorities and the blockage of the Facebook itself in Pakistan in the wake of the provocative cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published on Facebook, there had been people writing blogs thereby mobilizing people against the religious extremism. Similarly, the powerful parties like Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which itself was a victim in the form of its former governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer who was assassinated on the charges of being blasphemous, could not speak a word against the act. This was because such statements would inflict a loss on PPP in terms of voter support. While it was difficult to speak against the religious extremism, some civil society groups took the cause upon them and circulated a petition in the form of a letter to all

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<sup>5</sup> These data were gathered for another project. However, we find a portion of the data gathered during this period significant for the purpose of evaluating Jama'at's efforts to win additional support online amidst the progressive civil society's narrative. Therefore, we avoid here presenting an overall analysis of the data gathered.

heads of the state institutions to ensure rule of law in the wake of religious extremism. The campaign “Citizens for Democracy”, terming itself an umbrella group comprising professional organizations, political parties, trade unions, and individuals, called for rallies in different cities to express solidarity with the victims and aware the people of the negative effects of the (anti-blasphemy) law. It also established a weblog and several Facebook groups to spread information about its activities and provide a platform for debate (Michaelson, 2011; Aziz 2011a; Sarwar, 2011b). Provision of such information and activities online at times when they are blacked out by the traditional media due to fear of the sentiments of the people and other reasons, indicate that views can be softened about such extreme position when information are made available. However, such information, due to the selective exposure quality of the internet may reinforce the relevant side of the discourse and not create plurality. It is, however, possible that these discourses may get chances of being exposed to people of different mindset due to the availability of the social networking websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter etc. One of the advantages to the left-wing civil society organizations on the internet is that, they can post stuff in accordance with their ideational frameworks than those of the religious political parties like the Jama’at. The reason for this is that, since the Jama’at is involved in electoral politics, they must be very cautious while disseminating any message by also keeping in view the existing public opinion. Posting any material which does not conform to the mindset of the majority may reduce support for the Jama’at in terms of vote-support. The social movements with no electoral politics involvement are relatively advantaged to promote the causes they want online because of their reliance on their ideational framework and goals they set and not on the vote of the people. Cornfield *et al.* (2003) argue that while citizens are increasingly being drawn to the digital media, the interest group and non-partisan websites attract them the most. Nonetheless, one of the problems for such civil society organizations comes from the crowd sourced censorship/threats/intimidations. While the nexus of religion and politics is not only believed and being promoted by the “Islamist” parties in Pakistan, it is the case with the state itself too. Sometimes, the state institutions encourage the people to report any blasphemous content on the internet. For example, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority displays a public notice on its website to report any blasphemous URL (PTA, n.d.). According to Freedom House, the Internet Freedom Scores for Pakistan in 2017 was 71/100 where 0 is the most free and 100 is least free. There are several obstacles to the freedom of internet in Pakistan. Some obstacles are related to restrictions on connectivity e.g. mobile internet service was blocked in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for more than a year starting in June

2016. Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act in August 2016 is the legal regulatory control that introduces stronger surveillance and censorship. There are also prosecutions and detentions for online activities e.g. a teenager was arrested for allegedly “liking” a post on Facebook which was “blasphemous”. Similarly, a court awarded death sentence in a separate blasphemy case in 2017. Moreover, there are dangers of intimidations and violence for online activists. Five bloggers known for criticizing authorities and religious militancy were abducted in January 2017, one of them saying he was detained and tortured. Mashaal Khan, a Journalism student in Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan was lynched by a mob on the charges of committing online blasphemy. There are also technical attacks on the online activists. In January and April 2017 Dawn News, a leading English newspaper, reported that its website was under sustained cyber-attacks. Dawn had reported on the apparently enforced disappearances of bloggers and on civil-military relations aggressively (Freedom house, 2017).

It appears that in most of the above discussed cases, the Jama’at must have no problem. This is because those who are pro-Pakistani and pro-Islam are the Jama’at’s target to convey their message to (Zaman, 2017). All the above online restrictions, intimidations, violence and technical attacks, thus, must have little to no effect on the online activities of the Jama’at as compared to the civil society organizations advocating human rights and following a progressive agenda. Section 37 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 grants the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) wide powers to block or remove any online content that it deems unlawful, “if it considers it necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court or commission of or incitement to an offense under this Act” (Freedom house, 2017). Keeping in view the Jama’at’s position for their emphasis on anti-blasphemy, it can be argued that the legal, illegal and technical arrangements to contain the dissenting voices from the progressive civil society pertaining to the identity/integrity of the state, its security vis-à-vis the human rights and minority rights<sup>6</sup> on internet might benefit the Jama’at and cause the opponents, in this case the progressive civil society organizations/activists, to impose a self-censorship on themselves in the wake of these threats. Thus, in the context of Pakistan, the progressive online challenges to the Jama’at’s ideational framework/narrative may prove less competitive and hence gain lesser attention in the presence of these

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<sup>6</sup> It should not be taken as if the Jama’at does not have an understanding of human rights and minority rights. Rather the dissenting discourses differ significantly with the view of the Jama’at in some of these basic areas due to the difference in their worldviews.

threats. It is noteworthy, that demonstrating against the blasphemous issues has been a significant part of the Jama'at's narrative and politics as the data collected from their social networks show. Nevertheless, such political and top-down arrangements may not prove to boost support for the Jama'at in the arena of electoral politics. The history of the Jama'at has a big chunk of demonstrations and show of street power thereby influencing state policies though being out of legislature (Nasr, 1994; Ullah, 2014). Such efforts, however, have never acceded significant success to the Jama'at in the arena of electoral politics. The presence of left-wing civil society's discourse on the internet, however, can create impact by encouraging the like-minded to form shared identities thereby promoting their cause. The efforts to develop a narrative by "Citizens for Democracy" on internet and social networking platforms, as stated above, directly oppose the one by the Jama'at since it was the party to aggressively campaign in favor of Mumtaz Qadri<sup>7</sup> thereby stirring the public sentiments. Numerous other progressive civil society organizations can be found on the internet in Pakistan thereby criticizing the very roots of policies the state has been pursuing and the Jama'at endorsing.

### **Blogs, their potential for impacting public opinion and Jama'at's message**

According to social media head of the Jama'at, they have bloggers who advance their cause. They send their writings to *Daleel*, *Mukalma*, *Danish* and other blog sites in Pakistan. Usually media houses have their own blog sites now-a-days, therefore, Jama'at bloggers send their articles to all these blog sites and get published. But the main are Hum Sub and Daleel which are left and right-wing blog sites respectively. Also, Express, Dawn, Geo etc. publish Jama'at activists' blogs on their sites (Amjad, 2017).

Similarly, according to Jama'at's Punjab chapter IT Manager there is a team of bloggers who write blogs both in Urdu and English. However, the Jama'at official website only publishes those blogs which are written by Jama'at member activists. The affiliated bloggers' blogs are only projected through Jama'at social media accounts (Zaman, 2017).

Nonetheless, we did not notice blogs from the Jama'at activists concerning the Jama'at's ideology or way of bringing the change in accordance with their ideational framework on the official social media accounts of Jama'at<sup>8</sup>. Sometimes, they share blogs/media articles on social media official page when they are in favor of the Jama'at leadership and corruption-free image or a response

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<sup>7</sup>The assassin of former governor of Punjab Salman Taseer who was assassinated on the charges of having committed blasphemy.

<sup>8</sup>Data collected from Facebook and Twitter official accounts of Jama'at



to an issue with IJT in the university campuses. For instance, Amir Khakwani's, a journalist, article was posted on Jama'at official account on Facebook praising IJT and its positive role in universities. The article was posted in the wake of violent clashes between IJT and Pukhtoon Students in the University of Punjab in March 2017. Similarly, an article written by a young man on a blogging site was posted by JIP Official on Facebook showing how positively he was influenced with the behavior of Jamaat people and which is why he became a member of Jama'at<sup>9</sup>. Popular social media site, Facebook's, official account of Jama'at is empty of links as far as ideological articles/blogs regarding Jama'at's ideational framework are concerned.

A relatively progressive blogging site is "Hum Sub" where civil society activists, professional and amateur journalists publish their views. It is a blogging site encouraging amateur journalists and writers by publishing their articles/blogs. The site publishes articles/blogs in Urdu language. Its global rank according to Alexa is 15711<sup>10</sup>. The website usually follows a progressive agenda by publishing material in opposition to the right-wing narrative. For instance, it published a series of articles commenting on the violent activities by IJT – a sister organization of Jama'at, in University of Punjab on March 21, 2017 (Tribune.com, 2017). Similarly, it projected Javed Ahmad Ghamidi by appreciating his "intellectual" and critical views on various policies of the state standing in contrast to the very basis of the ideational framework of Jama'at. "Daleel" is a website publishing articles in Urdu and follows mostly a right-wing agenda. As the head of social media department of Jama'at remarked, "several activists from Jama'at publish their material on "Daleel," we recorded a very tiny portion of links to "Daleel's" website by Jama'at Facebook account during the course of data collection. For instance, a single article during this period was found on Jama'at's Facebook official account.<sup>11</sup> The articles of both the websites can though be found on Facebook – the popular social networking website in Pakistan. The absence of links by Jama'at official account on Facebook and Twitter to the right-wing blogging site *Daleel* and others, if any, does not negate the influence these blogs have on the public opinion. However, the scope of this study is limited to exploring the narrative being officially adopted by Jama'at on its online social

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<sup>9</sup> The article titled "May Jamaat-e-Islami may keunaaya: Zeeshan Ahmad Teepuqialamsy" (Why I joined Jamaat?: From the pen of Zeeshan Ahmad Teepu) - Data collected from Facebook official account of Jama'at

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/humsub.com.pk> accessed March 4, 2018

<sup>11</sup> The article was published by "Daleel.org" under the title "May Jamaat-e-Islami ka karkun hon - Ahsan Sarfaraz" (I am a worker of Jamaat-e-Islami by Ahmad Sarfaraz). The article was shared on Jama'at's official account on Facebook.

networks. Though, the impact they both have on the public opinion will be a worthy study, this study only underscores the importance and potential impact of these two leading blog sites when it comes to cyber activism from both the right and left wing civil society groups in Pakistan and Jama'at's strategy to navigate through the contesting voices to inform the public opinion.

### **Conclusion**

Jama'at's efforts to win new online support face discursive challenges from the progressive civil society of Pakistan. However, some of these challenges are tried to be tackled primarily through state regulatory controls which are reinforced by some constituents of Jama'at's narrative e.g. anti-blasphemy campaigns being in conformity with the state's narrative for national integration. This part of Jama'at's narrative thus reinforces state's regulatory controls which tend to normalize internet in Pakistan in favor of the established narrative/interests/organizations. The left wing civil society organizations/activists, however, in the wake of these controls and fear of violence and threats for their online activities cannot use internet as a level-playing field vis-à-vis the established ideological narrative. Based on empirical evidence, these findings also suggest that deterministic approaches to study the relationship of internet and socio-political & economic dimensions of life fall short of explaining it.

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