

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Artificial Intelligence as a Tool of Digital Resistance: The Case of PTI's Vs Establishment in Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the functioning of artificial intelligence (AI) in the post-2022 political landscape of Pakistan as a form of digital resistance, applied by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in its dispute with the military regime. Following the April 2022 no-confidence ousting of Imran Khan, and the ensuing ban on mainstream PTI views, the party depended more and more on digital platforms particularly X (then twitter) to maintain its political communication in the climate of censorship and repression. The paper extends the discussions of digital sovereignty and networked populism by considering AI-generated political media as a technology as well as a semiotic system that builds legitimacy, cultural authenticity, and continuity of leadership models by using signs and codes. PTI published an AI-generated video of Imran Khan in March 2025, the main empirical object, which received a viral cross-platform reach, which served as symbolic presence-in-absence when PTI was suppressed on an institutional level. It can be analyzed that the AI approach of PTI is a blend of cultural symbolism, platform affordances, and narrative framing, which is emotional in order to overcome the communication barriers and recruit youth-centered digital networks. Nevertheless, the paper points to the two-sided danger of AI, how the same infrastructure that facilitates dissent can be deployed against individuals to survey, spread fake news, and undermine trust in vulnerable information infrastructures. The results indicate that the AI-based opposition in hybrid regimes transforms the political authenticity by grounding legitimacy on the concept of collective identities instead of embodiment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Synthetic Media, Digital Resistance, PTI, Imran Khan, Digital Sovereignty, Global South

Introduction

The political system of Pakistan has experienced a steep change since 2022 and is characterized by the increase in confrontation between the military establishment and the civilian political actors. This division was most evident in the example of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), after the scandalous ousting of Prime Minister Imran Khan using a no-confidence motion which a large number of people saw as being establishment-led (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024; Haleeemi & Shah, 2024). Following the post-event systematic repression against PTI through media blackouts, legal persecution, internet disconnection, restrictions on the rights to gather collectively, and marginalization of the party to mainstream political communication channels (Kaunert & Khan, 2025).

In reaction to this marginalization PTI has moved its political communication strategically to digital media; X (previously Twitter) so that it can circumvent censorship and continue to engage the population. This movement was accompanied by the increased use of generative artificial intelligence throughout the world, which PTI quickly introduced as a means of communication. The most noticeable was the AI-created footage of Imran Khan speaking the country in March 2025, which was shared in the official X account of PTI (PTI Official X Account, 2025; Khan & Ahmed, 2024). This video, which portrays Khan in culturally appealing clothes and uses a style of rhetorical delivery, has received more than 10 million views in the first

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48 hours, and it indicates the effectiveness of the combination of AI-based mediation, symbolic coding, and the use of an emotionally charged political rhetoric (Khan & Ahmed, 2024; Ahmad, 2025).

Artificial intelligence has come to play as one of the fundamental infrastructures of digital resistance, whereby political actors would bypass state censorship, organize their supporters and report back on repression by oppressive regimes. The PTI-military establishment political conflict offers an interesting example of how AI-powered technologies can be used against the power of the established institutions. Since April 2022, when the Imran Khan was ousted and then the leadership of the PTI and the media were suppressed, the party and its supporters utilized online resources to maintain political discourse and organizational continuity (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024; Hussain, 2023).

The ability to communicate even with information restrictions set by the state was orchestrated with the help of AI-powered tools at PTI. These were the deepfake-like avatars, AI voice cloning, and amplification of content through algorithms, and automated translation to regional languages, which used much less reliance on the conventional media (Khan & Ahmed, 2024; Moroojo et al., 2025). In the 2024 general elections when coverage of the PTI in the broadcast media was pushed to its maximum limits: AI-generated political content was pushed on platforms like Tik Tok and X, continuing to raise awareness and elicit support among the youth. This highlighted the presence of AI to facilitate digital opposition in the face of authoritarianism (Raza et al., 2025; UNDP Pakistan, 2024).

Review of Literature

Implementing AI in digital resistance is also very dangerous and contradictory in its structure. State and non-state actors may use the same technologies that enable marginalized voices to spy, mislead, and control people (Baig, 2024; Uddin et al., 2025). Pakistan The military institution has been actively using AI-based surveillance and tracking technologies to censor, infiltrate, and curb PTI-oriented digital activism, including the concept of AI-generated political content, as being a form of psychological warfare or digital extremism (Wattoo, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024).

The issue of authenticity and trust among the population has also been enhanced by the spread of synthetic media in politics. The state and opposition actors have charged one another with the use of bots and deepfakes to control voters, which adds to an ever-decreasing epistemic situation (Ghilzai, 2025; Fallis, 2022). However, the implementation of AI at PTI should be placed in the context of a greater trend in the world where grassroots movements are using new technologies to challenge hegemonic discourses and impose political agency in situations of repression. In a world in which physical gathering has been criminalized, with newsrooms being co-opted, AI-enhanced digital opposition turns out to be an ultimate frontier of political expressiveness (Siddiq, 2023).

In contrast to the Western democracies: AI is mostly used to micro-target people, do predictive analytics, and surveillance capitalism; in Pakistan, AI is used as a means of narrative survival by opposition actors who are not part of mainstream media (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2023). This paper thus discusses the ways with which the implementation of AI by PTI transforms political communication in highly unequal power systems. The key idea of this analysis is the notion of digital sovereignty that highlights the entitlement of marginalized actors to create political realities using technological affordances instead of institutional access (Couldry & Mejias, 2023).

This trend corresponds to the general tendencies of the Global South, in which digital innovation is born out of necessity, and not abundance (Milan & Treré, 2023). The AI-based strategy of PTI is also a form of networked populism where hierarchical party organizations are substituted by the mobilization engine through decentralized digital networks (Castells, 2023). Digital Insaf, a youth-led campaign and other meme campaigns and hashtag activism, as well as regulating the spread of AI-generated materials, have been instrumental in installing AI into participatory political culture (Raza, 2025).

The artificial intelligence-created video of Imran Khan cannot be limited to deep fake fraud. Instead, it is a mediated cultural performance of authenticity utilizing the visual semiotics to re-create Khan as a native moral leader within the postcolonial frameworks of identity (Jamal, 2023; Ahmed, 2024). However, this innovation is taking place in a weak legal and ethical context. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of Pakistan does not provide clear guidelines on the use of synthetic media, which allows creative resistance and arbitrary prosecution (Malik, 2024; Raza et al., 2025).

Methodology

This paper applies semiotic analysis to discuss how artificial intelligence (AI) generated political media is a sign system in which Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) creates significance, validity, and opposition in circumstances of censorship, suppression, and media suppression. Rather than asking AI to be a means of technology, the research letter considers AI outputs (synthetic videos, voice clones, AI captions, speech that mimics deepfakes, the forms of memes) as semiotic texts that represent cultural identity, affective mobilization, and political power.

This paper uses the semiotic analysis to discuss the role of artificial intelligence-produced political media as a system of signs as a constrained political communication space in Pakistan in 2022. The key focus of the analysis is the AI-generated video of Imran Khan in March 2025, distributed by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) at the time of incarceration, media censorship, and state repression. Semiotics will enable this study to escape the aspect of technological novelty, and rather examine how meaning was created, transmitted and deciphered using symbolic representation, cultural codes and platform affordances.

Figure 1



Basic Semiotic concepts applied:

Sign

The AI video of Imran Khan serves as the main indicator. It is not considered a factual document, but a meaning-producing artifact.

Signifier

- Image of Imran Khan reconstructed digitally.
- Artificial voice with his cadence and sound.
- Kameez and Shalwar with waistcoat
- Direct gaze into the camera
- Urdu linguistic register

Signified

- Moral legitimacy
- Cultural authenticity
- Leadership continuity even when in prison.
- Elitist and Westernization of politics.
- Presence-in-absence

Referent

The actual Imran Khan: trapped physically, restricted politically and silenced institutionally: Notably, with Saussure, the signifier and referent are not natural as opposed to constructed. The AI video does not strive to present Khan in a truthful manner but instead creates meaning with culturally legible codes.

Chain of meaning (Connotation)

- Meaning is built up, by associative chains, one sign indicating another:
- White shalwar kameez: simplicity: piety: local morality.
- Waistcoat- statesmanship- national leadership.
- Urdu diction, cultural belonging, elite English discourse rejection.
- Look in the eye in a direct gaze- sincerity- trustworthiness.
 - AI mediation-technological resurrection-symbolic immortality

These chains turn synthetic media into a counter-hegemonic political speech and incorporate the video into the postcolonial semiotic repertoire of Pakistan.

Syntagm and Paradigm

Syntagmatic Structure

The significance of the video is the result of the sequential association of signs:

- Khan seems to be in the middle and motionless (authority, calm).
- Conventional clothes provide a cultural foundation.
- Addressing morally involves moral intimacy.
- Recognized voice maintains the affective continuation.
- The native framing of platform is ideal in terms of algorithmic dissemination.

Any alteration in the sequence would entirely change the interpretation of the text.

Paradigmatic Choices

- Western suit as opposed to shalwar kameez.
- English instead of Urdu
- AI disclaimer was preemptive rather than repressed.
- Address is not straightforward but indirect.

The choice of paradigms that PTI offers reduces the range of readings preferred by PTI, meaning that the audiences are directed to the path of what is right, rather than to what is wrong.

Representational Codes

In accordance with visual semiotic systems, the video uses recognizable categories of representation:

Representation of Bodies

- Calm posture
- Minimal movement
- Centered framing
 - Facilitates moral sanity and moderation.

Representation of Manner

- Steady gaze
- Controlled speech
- Absence of spectacle
→ Idealizes authority and being right.

Representation of Activity

- Speaking, not performing
- Addressing, not commanding
→ Makes Khan a moral leader and not a demagogue.

Props and Setting

- Neutral background
- No luxury or insignia of the state.
– Strengthens anti-elite and populist symbolism.

How Is Meaning Produced?

The meaning is created as the result of semiotic convergence and not realism.

Most ideological work is done by a few heavily charged signs:

- Cultural dress
- Familiar voice
- Emotional address

Aesthetics Algorithms: Friendly Aesthetics

Based on the encoding/decoding model by Hall, PTI encoded a desirable reading: the AI video needs to be interpreted as symbolic continuity, and not fabrication. The message was decoded by audiences, and especially by youth and diaspora networks to a large extent, meaning the artifact of AI was perceived as resistance and not misinformation.

Digital Resistance Semiotics:

- Within a hybrid regime where:
- Assembling is limited physically.
- Broadcast media is censored
- Legal systems are politicized.

AI can be used as a semiotic survival tool.

The AI avatar is a performative sign which:

- Replaces embodied presence
- Has a sovereignty of narratives.
- Makes technological mediation politically legitimate.

This is in line with the idea of digital sovereignty, in which the marginalized actors restructure the meaning-production power in the face of epistemic injustice.

Semiotic Implications

The video by AI upsets traditional binaries:

- Authentic / inauthentic
- Real / fake
- Truth / fiction

Rather, it works under what we can call truthful fiction: a symbolic art that brings out more political truths of repression, censorship and power. Here, authenticity will cease to be present in biological presence, but in the recognition of meaning in collective terms.

Considering the semiotic approach, the application of AI by PTI is not a sort of deception but re-signification. Imran Khan, which is developed by AI, is not an imaginary leader; he is an apologist of political memory, culture, and defiance. The case illustrates that, AI, as it is embedded in local cultural grammars, can be a technology of meaning-making, which can dispute the hegemonic narratives of the Global South. Nonetheless, this semiotic power also brings up ethical issues about the truth, consent, and democratic expression; issues that will require regulation and theoretical practices, as opposed to technological rejection.

Analysis

Table 1

AI Tools Used by PTI and Their Political Functions

AI Tool	Function	Political Purpose
GANs	Generate realistic images of Khan	Maintain visual presence during incarceration
Voice cloning	Replicate Khan’s speech tone and cadence	Sustain charismatic authority
AI translation	Convert messages into regional languages	Broaden grassroots reach
Text-to-video models	Create short synthetic speeches	Bypass media blackouts
Automated subtitle tools	Add captions for accessibility	Enhance virality on Reels/Shorts

The information indicates that PTI tactically used a combination of various AI to maintain the political presence of Imran Khan at the time when his visibility is limited. GAN-generated imagery, voice cloning, and text-to-video models facilitated the party to reproduce the persona of Khan throughout all digital platforms, which would help them avoid state mediated communication controls. Translation by AI and automated accessibility capabilities further increased diffusion of messages, which ensured message accessibility to language groups and viral spread among the younger, mobile-first audience. All these instruments acted as political surrogacy to physical looks, which served to enhance leadership succession even when in prison.

Table 2

Platform-Specific Engagement (March 2025 AI Video)

Platform	Views (48 hrs.)	Shares	Sentiment (Positive %)
X (Twitter)	10.2M	185,000	78%
YouTube	3.1M	42,000	72%
Facebook	2.8M	67,000	70%
Instagram	1.9M	29,000	81%

Source: Khan & Ahmed (2024); platform analytics

The engagement rates show that the AI-created PTI video has received impressive cross-platform growth in the 48 hours, with X (Twitter) being the most viewed and Instagram having a lot of positive feedback. These data show strong positive reaction of the population, between 70 and 81 percent, which speaks to the efficiency of AI-based messaging in creating a perception by the audience. Shared posts on YouTube, Facebook and X also attest to the virality of the content, which the amplification by an algorithm and emotionally charged political framing were instrumental to propagation.

Table 3
Semiotic Elements in the AI Video

Element	Cultural Meaning	Political Implication
White shalwar kameez	Simplicity, piety, anti-colonial identity	Contrasts with “Westernized” elite
Waistcoat	Traditional statesmanship	Legitimizes Khan as national leader
Direct gaze	Moral sincerity (Hall, 1980)	Builds trust with lower/middle-class voters
Urdu diction	Indigenous authenticity	Rejects elite English-medium discourse

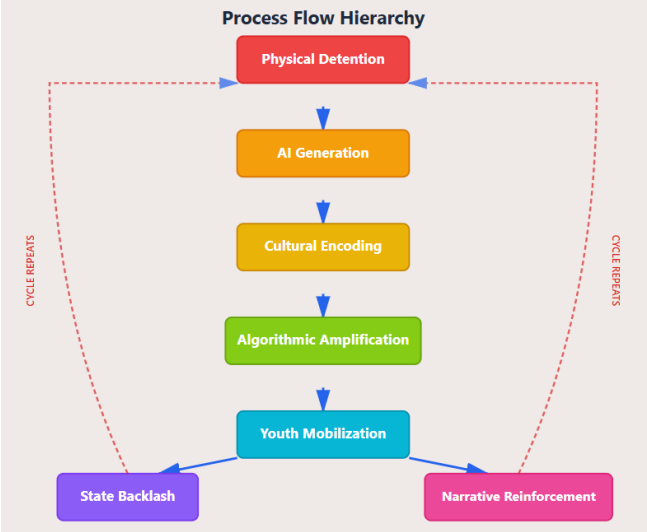
The semiotic analysis proves that the video strictly used culturally oriented symbols to strengthen the political identity of Imran Khan. The shalwar kameez and waistcoat are white, reminding a viewer of simplicity, old-fashioned leadership, and anti-elite story, which makes Khan much closer to the native moral values. His straight-forward looks and Urdu pronunciation reinforce the feelings of honesty and cultural genuineness and resonate especially with the middle- and low-income voters. All these factors make the artificial intelligence created image relatable and authoritative.

Table 4
State Countermeasures vs. PTI’s Digital Tactics

State Action	PTI Response	Outcome
Internet shutdowns	Encrypted messaging (Telegram, Signal)	Decentralized coordination
PECA arrests	Diaspora-led content hosting	Reduced vulnerability to local prosecution
AI detection units (ISPR)	Labeling content as “symbolic”	Moral high ground; avoids misinformation claims
Troll armies	Meme counter-campaigns	Youth-led narrative reclamation

The comparison shows active interaction between the state repression and adaptive digital tactics of PTI. As the government blocked the internet, made arrests and AI-surveillance teams, PTI bypassed these limits with encrypted communication, diaspora-hosted content, and symbolic presentation of AI results. The backfire of state-aligned trolls was also countered by the party through counter-narratives that were driven by memes. In general, the decentralized and tech-savvy reaction of PTI minimized the repression and continued its online momentum, especially among youth communities.

Figure 2
From Prison to Pixel: The AI Afterlife of Imran Khan”



Discussion

The digital strategy of PTI is a structural transformation in institutionalized political communication with hybrid conditions of failure to be seen due to media limitations, legal stress, and systematic interruption of the communication channels of the population in the time-periodical cycle (Ahmed and Rehman, 2024; Kaunert and Khan, 2025). The shift to platform-based communication among the party is not only a strategy of choice in this climate, but also the shifting of the struggle of politics out of the physical arena and television broadcast to more networked spaces of partial control and distributed resistance (Castells, 2023; Ahmed and Rehman, 2024).

PTI using AI; specifically, synthetic video and associated amplification strategies; exists within this larger change; as a strategy of communicative choke points bypass. The March 2025 artificial intelligence-created video featuring Imran Khan, which was distributed in its official space on X, is an example of how the voice of leadership can be maintained in case embodied political performance is limited (PTI Official X Account, 2025; Khan and Ahmed, 2024). The artifact does not emphasize the issue of realism so much as the production of legitimacy: it assists in the process of continuing the leadership and reinforces emotional connections that repression tends to disrupt (Khan & Ahmed, 2024).

The AI media of PTI attacks the culture with the semiotic power. Traditional dress signals and vernacular register, along with other visual and word choices, enable the production and expression of how the audience receives the message and how the recognition is created (Jamal, 2023; Ahmed, 2024). This is how the argument that AI-generated political content can serve as a cultural performance aimed at anchoring trust and belonging can be made, particularly in situations where political legitimacy is highly competitive and mediated using identity scripts (Jamal, 2023; Ahmad, 2025).

This is further enhanced by platform dynamics. Algorithms are more willing to promote emotionally arousing and visual content on politics, which may diffuse fast and reinforce networked mobilization especially in youth communities who are all decentralized amplifiers and not passive consumers (Moroojo et al., 2025; Raza, 2025). In times of limited mainstream circulation such diffusion turns into a kind of visibility politics, in which virality itself takes the place of institutional airtime and marginalized actors are able to contend in attention economies (Raza, 2025; Khan and Ahmed, 2024).

However, there are no ways to combine AI-based resistance with risks. The state and non-state surveillance, monitoring of content, and counter-messaging, which also involve implementing detection systems and securitized narratives that portray digital dissent as a threat, are also fed by AI tools in Pakistan (Baig, 2024; Uddin et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the mass communication of synthetic political media can undermine trust, create epistemic susceptibility, when citizens will not find it easy to differentiate between communication as a symbolic act of resistance and harmful disinformation (Fallis, 2022; Ghilzai, 2025). The ambiguity of the law only intensifies this tension: lax or discriminatory cyber regulation provides an opportunity to act creatively on the one hand, as well as arbitrarily criminalize on the other hand, particularly within general digital crime models (Malik, 2024; Raza et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The example of AI-mediated communication at PTI is relevant to how the actors of opposition in hybrid regimes can turn emerging technologies into the means of political opposition, especially when the visibility of the opposition is limited by censorship, legal persecution, and institutional hegemony. The AI video of March 2025 shows that the semiotically rebuild of political presence is possible by using culturally resonant signs and forms compatible with algorithm and allowing leadership narrative continuity even in the conditions of imposed absence. The resistance in this form takes place within the fragile information space where AI is both the weapon of empowerment and a source of danger. The same features that allow the PTI to survive in narrative terms also contribute to the enhancement of surveillance capabilities, the heightening of

disinformation risks, and a burden on the trust of people in particular situations where the legal protection is either underdeveloped or biased. Thus, it is not a mere question of technology that AI is politically relevant in Pakistan, but rather it is an institutional and normative issue that may transform the ways of the production and contestation of legitimacy, authenticity, and democratic participation in digitally mediated public life.

Recommendations

Pakistan needs to come up with a context-specific regulatory framework distinguishing between symbolic or creative political action fronts and malicious deepfakes, collaboratively developed with civil society, journalists, legal experts, and technologists to inhibit securitized overreach to suppress dissent.

To mitigate the epistemic vulnerability in relation to ensuring that legitimate political expression is not suppressed, social media platforms are to be required to add standardized disclosure labels and have open public archives of high-reach AI-generated political content.

Cyber laws on digital enforcement should be subject to independent control with explicit due-process criteria, limited legal definitions and judicial prerogative provisions so that arbitrary and selective enforcement can be limited. Internet disconnection and wholesale blocking of platforms in the course of an election should be limited by law and only to the extent of unequal denial of the right to vote and political representation.

Youth-oriented media literacy programs should be committed to by governments and civil society with stronger emphasis on verification skills and awareness regarding the emotional manipulation and algorithmic amplification of the political content.

Surveillance using AI should be open to a high degree of transparency, audits, and restrictions on biometric or identity inferences to ensure that it does not get normalized as a means of digital counterinsurgency.

Future Study and Limitations

The research is mostly on high-visibility AI-generated content and the offline behavioral or electoral impact is not empirically measured. There needs to be longitudinal studies on the effect of prolonged exposure to AI-mediated political messages on voters and institutional trust. The study is based on the platform analytics and second-hand information instead of direct responses to the interview with the audience or ethnography. The qualitative audience studies should be used in the future to learn more about how various social groups decipher AI-sourced political content. The research focuses on the case of PTI, which does not allow cross-party or cross-regime generalizability. Relational research between the opposition movements in other hybrid or authoritarian states might determine common patterns and differences in AI-based resistance.

Analysis of law is only limited by the dynamic and grey nature of the cyber governance framework at Pakistan. Future studies need to monitor regulatory trends and judiciary interpretation of synthetic media in order to influence the long-term effects of the digital rights and democratic accountability.

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