

Aurat March, a threat to mainstream tribalism in Pakistan

Ayaz Ahmed Siddiqui (25th April 2020)

Since 2018, civil society across the class spectrum has mobilized in major cities of Pakistan on International Women's day under the banner of Aurat March. Aurat, means 'woman' in Urdu. A radical appropriation of the global #metoo movement these demonstrations were first organized by a group of feminists in my hometown Karachi, one of the largest metropolises of the world. Much controversy is generated on local mainstream and social media by posters displayed at these demonstrations.

Pakistan's fledgling public sphere appears divided on women empowerment.

One side believes that the artistic expression on these posters raises the specter of immorality and all the 'degeneracy of the West' that entails in a movement organized by foreign funded women. In the words of New York Times columnist Muhammad Hanif, the prospect that women might get together in large numbers in public spaces with stencils and placards and not invite a man as their chief guest has got grown (Pakistani) men asking, frothing at their mouth, what do these women want?¹

The organizers of the March say that their campaign highlights grave injustices that are an everyday reality of historically vulnerable social groups in a society struggling to cope with modernity.

Thus, while participants appear to be mostly women, the substantive message of basic human dignity resonates equally with students, rural citizens, non-binary genders like *Khawaja Siras* and yes, even many angry men who are often victim of the same tribal values of toxic masculinity.

But the artistic expression generated around Aurat March is remarkable in bringing the conversation on women empowerment from an abstract public domain of a developing state to 'the kitchen and bedroom' of its citizens.

This success doesn't just lie in the way they irk mainstream sensibilities on the place of women in a traditional Muslim society. It also lies in effectively translating universal values of social justice, equality and human rights in Pakistan's unique cultural lexicon.

This year's demonstrations occurred amidst a heated national debate over Government of Pakistan's COVID-19 response. This was reflected in the vibrancy of contentious performances. In this essay I describe the logic behind some of these posters, what they mean for Pakistan's changing political context and ultimately hopefully what such activist repertoires can reveal about Muslim women contention elsewhere.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/opinion/international-womens-day-pakistan.html>

Anatomy of political slogans



Figure 1.0

As of writing, reported COVID19 deaths in Pakistan are 265 and the state is implementing a comprehensive response. However:

- Each year more than 1000 women are reportedly murdered in the name of 'honour'.
- 90% of women have faced some form of domestic violence at the hands of their husbands or families. 47% of married women have experienced sexual abuse, particularly domestic rape.
- The government has done little to address cultural norms at the root of domestic violence.



Figure 2.0

Through clever wordplay a link between misogynist behavior and a deadly pandemic is made in this poster. In English it reads *Khalil Ur Rehman, Shut Your Nonsense Already*. It calls out a local celebrity writer of a popular television soap for his misogynist views. The controversy was generated due to a popular Aurat March slogan *My Body My Consent*. Mr Rehman verbally abused a female human rights activist during a live TV program few days before the demonstrations for repeatedly uttering

the slogan. Video clips of the altercation went viral on social media and created a national outrage.

Slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*, which roughly translates as *My Body My Consent* in English, are protest tactics that leverage the power of media to create a cultural resonance between the activist demands for justice and the constituency whose interest they claim to represent.

Cultural resonance means reframing campaign messages so the public in a particular socio-political and cultural milieu can relate with the activist demands. *Kitabi batien* (English for, seemingly abstract concepts) like feminism, marital rape, consent, dignity, decency, get a life of their own when expressed in popular language.

This entails more than just their lexical usage. Norms, world view, rituals, practices and ways of thinking provide a tool chest for the activist to create preferred frames beyond simple English to Urdu translation.

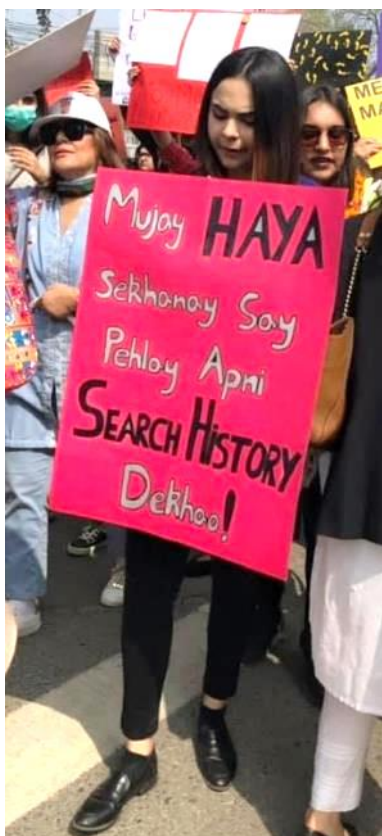


Figure 3.0

Check Your Internet Search History Before Preaching Modesty, is a loose English translation of this poster. Sex education is a difficult subject in some advanced democracies. But it is a special challenge in Muslim Pakistan where it is considered a taboo and the state prefers to ban porn websites. Of course, many still find ways to access exotic content.

Meanwhile, Slut Shaming is a pervasive practice. It starts with the girl's male relatives and ends with her husband. Public life is no different. This poster expresses the double standards for Muslim men and women in the popular language of morality. It does that in a way perhaps no presentation of statistic on 'honour' killing and sexual harassment could.

Through media the impact of these frames is magnified for outgroups mobilizing grassroots support in a system that violently resists class politics.

Such witty sloganeering should also resonate with Muslim communities elsewhere. It may allow them to go beyond petty squabbles over what feminism means to why Muslim women are so angry and against whom.



Figure 4.0

Trans folks in Pakistan endure allegations of inauthenticity and fraud, as well as invasive tests and procedures to determine their gender.

This activist has appropriated the surgical mask for protection against COVID19 but also as an added layer of anonymity.

The Aurat March advocates that every trans and non-binary person is included in educational institutes, workplaces, voting and healthcare facilities. So Pakistanis wouldn't need masks to express their thoughts in public life.

This binary, that binary, no binary!

The choice for a particular frame also depends on a handful of previously tried and tested material the activist knows works.

Observers of issue advocacy can describe how Aurat March slogans of today are a modification on those used in earlier feminist waves. Such as during the dictatorship of General Zia Ul Haq when women protested against discriminatory laws.

For this reason, some frames are more powerful than others because they resonate with even larger segments of society. Any social cause in Pakistan framed as *Ghadar (Traitor)*, *Corrupt*, *Bay Haya (Immodest)*, *Ghair Islami (Against Islam)*, for instance has the time-tested impact of threatening its very survival.

Historically, a weak state has used these tactics to govern and suppress dissent. They are handy for any political actor with national aspirations.

Although, I would argue that progressive movements elsewhere are engaged in similar discursive battles with far-right populist groups.



Figure 5.0 Aurat March 2020 participants in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital city.

A sign of changing political context

But Aurat March may be a sign of changing times in Pakistan.

Through their posters Marchers are creating a vocabulary to describe the world beyond a 'good Muslim Right Wing' and 'bad Muslim Western Liberal' dichotomy.

That is why these demonstrations resonate beyond the perceived feminist stereotype and even transcend counter-frames of *Ghadar* and *Bay Haya* lodged by opportunistic politicians. The state tolerance of the Aurat March is a testament to this.

In a recent paper, Katherine Adeney, a scholar of democratization in South Asia, shows that the biggest challenge to Pakistani democracy comes from a lack of civil liberties i.e. freedom of the press and assembly and rule of law, rather than reserved domains of power i.e. defence, security, public policy, and competitiveness of elections that are usually the focus of analysts².

The large illiterate population and a budding middle-class that is as illiberal as the elites it despises adds weight to her findings. They suggest that civic causes such as accountability for all, community education, women empowerment and information literacy must be prioritized to build governance capacity. Substantive issues as opposed to inane discussions among political elites on

² Adeney, K. (2017). How to understand Pakistan's hybrid regime: the importance of a multidimensional continuum. *Democratization*, 24(1), 119–137.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1110574>

many mainstream TV talk shows. Or, even more pointless discussion on Sharia Law, an issue Pakistanis always reject at the ballot.

The steady increase in number of cities that participate in Aurat March demonstrations each year indicates a rise in civic consciousness. Activists such as Ammar Ali Jan, who also teaches at Forman Christian College in Lahore, see these demonstrations, together with the recent student solidarity and climate change rallies in Pakistan, as a new opposition in the making. One where the electorate will not spread red carpet for the elected. Instead it will mobilize to demand rights as citizens of Pakistan³.

The current progressive wave in *Naya* Pakistan⁴ may have more to do with international pressure. But the discerning activist pounces on any political advantage that presents itself. While the millennial among them multiplies the advantage through technology. Let's not forget that a massive social media campaign of *Tabdeeli* helped push the PTI from the fringes to the mainstream.

Muslim women challenging the status quo

Since women make up nearly half of Pakistani population, many believe that women empowerment is a sorely needed development program. One that will have profound ripple effects in other sectors. This is almost certain because at present the country ranks 151st out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's global gender parity index. Faring only better than war torn Iraq and Yemen⁵.

As in activism world over those who feel threatened are often beneficiaries of status quo. Their level of offence at mere words on a placard is proportional to their position of privilege. This partly explain why there are supporters who are women and men on both sides of Aurat March.

Many in Pakistan are not prepared to lose their privilege. Participants in Islamabad were pelted with stones by hardline religious groups who happened to be hosting their own *Modesty March*. In the event, riot police stepped in to contain the frenzied mob but not before several women sustained injuries⁶.

The new generation of Pakistani activists, unlike the traditional 'leftists', are not necessarily preoccupied with the security establishment. They are concerned with civic rights. Indeed, civic rights for citizens are difficult to provide by states lacking the capacity to enforce rule of law.

³ Najam Sethi Official. January 4, 2020. Muqaddimah | Episode 5| New decade new opposition? [Video]. Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4Do4g8kGBU>.

⁴ *Naya* Pakistan or New Pakistan, and *Tabdeeli* or Change, are campaign slogan of Imran Khan the current prime minister of Pakistan. Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was an underdog that is well regarded for mobilizing a previously apolitical young vote bank.

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1522778>

⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539954>

A similar line of reasoning was made recently by the political scientists Francis Fukuyama in *The Atlantic*⁷. He observes that effective response to global challenges, such as the Coronavirus Pandemic, will be determined less by the binary between democracy and autocracy, and more by the trust between citizens and the state, as well as the state's capacity to govern.

Those questioning Aurat March poster's morality are forced to reckon with the deafening silence every time 'Islamic slogans' are used in the name of free speech to coerce Muslim women. More broadly, what pragmatic solutions these critics have for Pakistan's chronic social problems, and by extension, the Arab world.

Poster references

Figure 1.0

Source: author.

Facts:

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Figure 2.0

Source: public.

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Figure 3.0

Source: public.

<https://www.facebook.com/Hoodbhoyist/photos/a.910930622352458/2589840027794834/?type=3&theater> .

Figure 4.0

Source: author.

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>

Facts: see Figure 1.0 facts 2 and 3.

Figure 5.0

Source: public.

<https://www.facebook.com/Hoodbhoyist/photos/a.910930622352458/2589839964461507/?type=3&theater> .

For a detailed list of Aurat March demands kindly visit only verified social media accounts:

Facebook handle: @AuratMarchKarachi

Twitter handles: @AuratMarchKHI, @AuratMarch, @AuratAzadiMarch

About the author

Ayaz Ahmed Siddiqui is a PhD candidate at the School of Communication in Hong Kong Baptist University. He is researching on campaign messages of mainstream opposition groups and media liberalization in emerging media contexts such as Pakistan.