

Competitive Authoritarian Regimes, Securitisation Techniques and the Role of Audiences: The Case of Pakistan

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Abstract

The article investigates the importance of the audience (general public) in the securitisation process. It then applies the concept in the context of competitive authoritarianism using Pakistan as a case study. The article argues that similar to securitisation processes, the audience plays a significant role in the (de-) democratisation process. The article contributes to both theoretical and empirical literature on securitisation and democratisation by extending the role of the audience to the democratisation process during competitive authoritarian regimes.

Keywords

Securitisation, democratisation, the audience, competitive authoritarianism

Introduction

This article investigates the importance of the audience in the transition process during competitive authoritarian regimes. The article first analyses the role of the audience during the securitisation process and applies it in the context of competitive authoritarian regimes, using Pakistan as a case study.

Securitisation has emerged as a prominent theory in International Relations (IR). Central to the discussions around securitisation is the notion that security issues arise through their social construction by a ‘securitising actor’, rather than existing objectively in the world. According to the initial framework proposed by the ‘Copenhagen School’, this securitisation process has a linguistic dimension, as security is characterised as a ‘speech act’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 26;

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Wæver, 1995: 54–55). A securitising actor articulates a specific issue as an existential threat to the survival of a ‘referent object’, such as a state or nation, and asserts the justification for employing extraordinary measures in response. If the audience accepts this ‘securitising move’, then the process of securitisation is deemed successful. Securitising actors are often political leaders and governments (Buzan et al., 1998: 40), while the audience role usually falls to the general public or parliamentary members, with the media sometimes playing this role as well (Salter and Mutlu, 2013). In addition, one audience may encompass various groups (Leonard and Kaunert, 2011; Salter, 2008). Overall, the audience is targeted to accept that an issue is under threat (Buzan et al., 1998).

Pakistan is an interesting case study because the country has experienced democratic erosion and the rise of competitive authoritarianism in recent years, with the military exerting significant control over various aspects of the country without formally imposing martial law. The article demonstrates that the regime in Pakistan has strategically employed securitisation techniques to depict the political leader (Prime Minister Imran Khan in this case) and his party (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf – Movement for Justice) as a threat to the country’s security. We also argue that the audience (the general public) has not accepted these techniques. Does the audience matter in competitive authoritarianism as it does in securitisation processes? We argue that similar to the securitisation process, the audience plays a significant role in the transition process in a competitive authoritarian regime.

The securitisation framework has been used by scholars to analyse how specific issues are framed as security threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures or responses. However, this article is unique in its application of securitisation theory to understand the techniques used by securitising actors in a competitive authoritarian regime while emphasising the role of the audience in this process. It asserts that the transition to and from democracy in such regimes is influenced by how the audience perceives and responds to these securitisation efforts. To understand how competitive regimes use securitisation, the article lays the theoretical groundwork by explaining competitive authoritarianism and its characteristics. It explains securitisation and its related concepts such as the securitising actors, referent object and audience. It also highlights the importance of the audience in the securitisation process. The article grounds theoretical concepts in real-world contexts by providing concrete examples and case studies from Pakistan. The article highlights that the role of the audience is crucial in determining the regime’s trajectory in competitive authoritarian regimes. The article contributes to the literature on securitisation and democratisation. It uses the concept of the audience to understand its significance in competitive authoritarian regimes, thus contributing to the debate on the democratisation process.

The article is structured into three sections. The first section explains competitive authoritarianism and its characteristics and analyses if Pakistan qualifies to be categorised as a competitive authoritarian regime. Section ‘Competitive Authoritarianism’ deals with securitisation framework and how it works in competitive authoritarian regimes. The last section analyses the case of Pakistan in the light of the synthesised framework. The section explains the transition within a competitive authoritarian regime, focusing on the role of the audience. The article examines the critical debates on securitisation and democratisation in the existing literature. Essential work published on the discussion and online sources are used for data collection.

Competitive authoritarianism

Since the third wave of democratisation, scholars have grappled with a lack of consensus regarding the definition and classification of democracy (Diamond, 2002: 21). Schumpeter (1947) proposes Minimalist approach defines democracy as a system in which the principal positions of power are

obtained ‘through a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ (p. 269). Similarly, Huntington asserts that a system can be considered democratic when its most influential decision-makers are chosen through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes (Huntington, 1991: 7). However, Robert Dahl (1989: 22) raises concerns about measuring free and fair elections. Gilbert and Mohesni (2011) also argue that mere competition and multi-party elections do not suffice to make a system democratic; the rotation of power and turnover are also crucial factors (Gilbert and Mohesni, 2011). Robert Dahl (1971) contends that freedom of expression and association are essential for making elections free, competitive, and meaningful.

After the third wave of democratisation, many regimes shared the combined features of democracy and authoritarianism (Samad, 2017: 509). The scholars classified these regimes as ‘hybrid’. They were further classified as semi-democracies and illiberal democracies (Diamond et al., 1995; Zakaria, 1997). Levitsky and Way (2002; 2010) further classified the non-democratic dimension of democracy into electoral and competitive authoritarianism. Epstein et al (2006: 568) divide regimes into autocracy, democracy and partial democracy. This increasing debate on democracy and its subtypes has created conceptual confusion (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 451). Therefore, Levitsky and Way (2002) classify democratic regimes into the following three categories: democratic, competitive authoritarian and full authoritarian regimes. They maintain that competitive authoritarianism is a type of hybrid regime. We use Levitsky and Way’s (2002) definitions to categorise Pakistan. We argue that Pakistan qualifies the attributes of a competitive authoritarian regime. They further argue that the end of the Cold War witnessed the collapse of military dictatorships and one-party systems in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, this transition did not establish democracies in many regions, including Asia, Africa, the Americas, Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union regimes combined electoral competition with authoritarianism. Unlike military dictatorship and single-party systems, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine and Zimbabwe regimes were competitive. Democratic institutions existed, and multi-party elections were held but were unfair and unfree. They define the system as competitive authoritarianism, where the incumbent governments have an advantage vis-à-vis opposition, and they abuse powers and manipulate elections. They call it a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 5).

They further argue that in a democracy, there are free elections, civil liberties and a level playing field for opposition. In contrast, in competitive authoritarianism, elections are held, and there is competition, but it is not fair and free. In full authoritarianism, there is no competition, and no viable channels exist for opposition to contest elections. Unlike full authoritarianism, in competitive authoritarianism, the incumbent abuses the defining principles of democracy, such as free elections, protection of civil liberties and a level playing field. Elections are held regularly, but they are unfair and unfree. Similarly, civil liberties exist nominally, and they are protected partially. There is no level playing for the opposition; the incumbent government is systematically favoured, and the opposition is subjected to abuses.

This article suggests a novel perspective on the political developments in Pakistan, framing them within the framework of competitive authoritarianism and using securitisation theory to analyse the role of the political audience in potential transitions within such a regime. Based on the concept that describes competitive authoritarianism as a system where elections are held, but they are often marred by irregularities and a lack of genuine competition, leading to an unfair political playing field, we argue that Pakistan should be categorised as a competitive authoritarian regime. The article proposes that the potential transition within a competitive authoritarian regime depends on the role of the political audience. This is an original perspective because it suggests that the behaviour and actions of citizens or the political audience, more generally, can play a pivotal role in shaping political change. We use securitisation theory to define the political audience and investigate its role in regime transition during competitive authoritarian regimes. Securitisation theory,

often associated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, is used to analyse how issues are framed as security threats and the subsequent measures taken to address them. This article thus contributes to the securitisation debate by applying securitisation theory in a different context (competitive authoritarian regimes). The theory helps us understand the audience's role in democratisation process. We demonstrate that similar to the securitisation process, the audience plays a vital role in the democratisation process.

Securitisation in competitive authoritarian systems

Securitisation has become one of the leading theories in IR, explaining how everyday issues are transformed into security issues (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022). The theory was initially developed by Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan & de Wilde also known as the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998: 36). Buzan et al. (1998) and his colleagues argue that there is no objective security (p.24). One of the critical contributions of securitisation theory is (unlike the realist paradigm, which views threat objectively and argues that there is a 'real' threat) that it argues that security is socially constructed (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022). They argue that issues are socially constructed as security threats through securitisation. They define securitisation as a discourse that presents something as an existential threat to a referent object (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022). However, this does not create securitisation. They call it *securitisation move*. There are the following three components in securitisation theory: (1) a referent object, (2) securitising actors, and (3) audience. A referent object is something which is existentially threatened and must be survived. Securitising actors declare that an issue (referent object) is existentially threatened. The actors that commonly fill the role of securitising actors are political leaders, governments (Buzan et al., 1998: 40) and the military in cases like Pakistan. Similarly, the audience role is filled by the general public or parliament; in some cases, the media also performs the role of the audience (Salter and Mutlu, 2013). Audience can also combine several audiences (Leonard and Kaunert, 2011; Salter, 2008). The Audience is the target that is persuaded that an issue is threatened (Buzan et al., 1998).

According to securitisation theorists, the audience has an essential role in any successful securitisation act (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998; Leonard and Kaunert, 2011) because an issue becomes a security threat not because it constitutes an objective threat but because the audience accepts the securitisation actors' position that an issue constitutes a threat to a referent object (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022: 69). According to Balzacq (2005), the securitising actors need formal or moral support. In case of launching a war, conducting military operations, or in case of Pakistan depicting political leaders as an existential threat, the government needs moral support from the public. At the same time, it also needs the formal support of the relevant institutions to execute the securitisation strategy (Balzacq, 2005: 184–185). The concept of audience has been conceptualised by Balzacq (2005), Salter (2008), Leonard and Kaunert (2011), and Cote (2016). However, the above studies do not offer a mechanism identifying 'why a specific actor performs the role of the audience during the securitisation process while others do not' (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022: 71). Balzacq (2005) separated formal and moral support of audience to securitising actors and mentioned the important aspect of formal support over moral support to conduct successful securitisation. Wertman and Kaunert (2022: 72) critically analyse the conceptual frameworks of the audience enhanced by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde; Balzacq; Salter; Leonard and Kaunert; Cote and argue that the above works cannot recognise the pertinent audience that must be persuaded for conducting successful securitisation act. Wertman and Kaunert (2022) question what kind of legitimacy both formal and informal audiences grant to securitising actors and the sources of legitimacy. For instance, do official institutions grant legitimisation for securitisation according to the state's laws, or does the legitimisation emanate from other sources?

(Wertman and Kaunert, 2022) They argue that the legitimacy for securitisation emanates from the following two sources: the state, which has an impact on the legal audience, and the political perception, which has an impact on the political audience. They further state that the legal audience's legitimacy for security emanates from the law of each state, which informs the actors from which institutions must seek support for securitisation policy.

Leonard and Kaunert (2011: 65–68) categorise the audience into the following three streams: problem, policy and politics. A specific audience characterises each stream. In the 'problem' stream, the decision-makers involved in the policy-making process perform the audience role. In the 'policy' stream, specialists and technocrats who are convinced by the arguments perform the role of the audience. The general public performs the audience role in the 'politics' stream (Leonard and Kaunert, 2011). Politics stream comprises public mood, popular campaigns, pressure groups, and election results, which show whether the audience accepts a policy proposal (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022). Salter (2008) suggests four audience settings based on different logics: elite, technocratic, scientific, and popular. According to author and author, the securitisation of militancy in Pakistan in the aftermath of 9/11 failed because the general public did not accept militancy as an existential threat to the country rather they considered it a threat to the United States (Khan and Kaunert, 2023).

Wertman and Kaunert (2022: 74) have expanded the concept of the audience within the securitisation process by introducing two distinct categories: legal and political audiences. They define the legal audience as an entity with the legal authority, according to the state's rules, to execute the specific securitisation act. Without the support of this audience, the securitising actor lacks the legal capability and legitimacy to carry out the securitisation act (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022). However, they define the political audience as an entity whose support for, or lack of objection to, securitisation is not mandated by state rules but is perceived by the securitising actor and/or the broader audience as a crucial condition for the successful execution of the securitisation act. Without the political audience's support or absence of resistance, the securitising actor and/or audience believe there is insufficient legitimacy to proceed with securitisation (Wertman and Kaunert, 2022: 76).

The subsequent section explains how securitisation functions in specific political contexts, particularly within competitive authoritarian regimes, and the audience's role in this process. We use the concept of legal and political audiences and analyse if they are convinced by the securitisation techniques of the current competitive regime.

Transition in competitive authoritarianism

The existing literature on democratisation discusses the role of civil military, but little attention has been given to the importance of the audience in the transition process. According to Sarigil (2015), the role of civil-military relations has been discussed extensively in the literature. Still, much of the literature has adopted the dichotomous approach focusing on civil and military relations, ignoring the citizenry (audience). Schiff (1995: 24) observes,

[t]he current civil-military relations literature does not consider the citizenry but relies instead on political institutions as the main 'civil' analysis component. Although the relationship of civil institutions to the military is indeed important, it only partially reflects the story of civil-military relations.

Schiff argues that the basic assumption of civil-military relations is supported by dichotomous theory (Sarigil, 2015). In his concordance theory, he demonstrates that the military, the political elites and the active citizenry's enduring agreement prevents the military from increasing its political role.

Epstein et al. (2006: 566) explain the role of per capita income in democratisation. They demonstrate that per capita income increases the likelihood of democratic regimes. It consolidates the existing democracies and promotes the transition from authoritarian to democratic systems (Epstein et al., 2006). Similarly, Feng and Zak (1999: 174) argue that democratic transitions are less likely when there is less development, high-income inequality and poorly educated citizens.

As stated earlier, these studies, however, do not explain the role of the audience in competitive authoritarian regimes. Securitisation in competitive authoritarianism means the process of depicting political parties and their leaders as security threats to the country. According to securitisation theory, the audience may accept or reject this process. The securitisation process depends on the role of the audience and how they perceive the process. We argue that if the audience (general public) accepts the efforts of securitising actors depicting political parties and their leaders as security threats, the regime may transition to full authoritarianism. If the audience rejects the actors' claim that political parties threaten security, the regime may likely transition to democracy. Securitising actors are the incumbent government, which combines features of democratic and authoritarian regimes, where opposition parties and civil societies exist but face significant challenges from the incumbent government. However, as stated earlier, how the general public perceives the securitisation process influences the regime's future trajectory. This will lead to two possible scenarios:

General Public Acceptance of Securitisation Efforts. If the general public accepts the government's efforts to portray political parties and their leaders as security threats, this can consolidate authoritarian rule. The government can use this perceived security threat as a justification for cracking down on opposition, curtailing civil liberties and tightening its control over the political landscape. The public, fearing instability or security risks, may be more willing to tolerate these authoritarian measures in the name of stability and security. Under these circumstances, the regime may become more repressive, with less space for opposition, and may not transition to democracy anytime soon.

General Public Rejection of the Security Threat Narrative. However, if the general public rejects the government's claims that political parties are a genuine security threat, they may not accept authoritarian measures and call for greater political openness and accountability. This rejection of the security narrative can lead to democratic demands, increased political participation and weakening the ruling party's grip on power. In such cases, the regime may be more likely to transition towards democracy as it faces pressure from civil society and a more politically active citizenry. It is important to note that the actual outcomes in competitive authoritarian regimes can be influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including the strength of civil society, the international community's stance, the regime's repression and the strategies employed by opposition parties. Public perception of the audience is just one element in this intricate dynamic. In addition, transitions from competitive authoritarianism to either democracy or full authoritarianism can be gradual and uncertain, and the path taken can vary from one country to another.

The case of Pakistan

Political history of Pakistan

After Partitioning, the Muslims of India obtained independence from the British government and a new country – Pakistan was born in August 1947. The father of the nation Quaid-e-Azam (The Great Leader), Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioned Pakistan as a liberal, moderate and tolerant country, not a military bureaucracy or an Islamic autocracy. Inheriting a parliamentary system from the British government, a parliamentary system was adopted under the Indian Independence Act of 1947.

The early demise of the founding father in 1948 led the country to frame its first constitution after 9 years in 1956. A parliamentary system was adopted in the new constitution. However, parliamentary democracy failed subsequently, and martial law was imposed in 1958 for the first time.

The military government implemented a new constitution in 1962, which adopted a presidential form of government. The presidential system also failed and led to the dismemberment of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from West Pakistan (now Pakistan) in 1971. After dismemberment, a new constitution was enforced in 1973, adopting a parliamentary system of government. Unlike past constitutions, the 1973 constitution was passed unanimously by the then-major political parties. However, the constitution 1973 was abrogated after 4 years, and martial law was imposed in 1977. The year 1988, democracy was restored, and a tumultuous democratic period continued until 1999. In October 1999, General Pervez Musharraf ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and imposed yet another martial law. The military regime ended in 2008, and democracy was again restored with the hope that the democratisation process would begin and democracy would be consolidated. However, instead of consolidation, democracy further eroded and transitioned to a 'hybrid regime'.

Pakistan has a tumultuous history of democracy. Numerous scholars consider the circumstances that led to the partition and the post-partition events as key factors responsible for the failure of democracy in Pakistan. Undoubtedly, Pakistan came into being as a result of Muslims' political moment, but those Muslims were not politically organised (Haqqani, 2006: 223–224). According to Ian Talbot (1999: 95), 'Pakistan's birth was a difficult one, which involved the immense suffering of thousands of its citizens. Its British midwife had abandoned it to a chaotic environment in which the elder Indian sibling looked on with hostility. Pakistan only inherited 23% of the land-mass of undivided India and 18% of the total population (Talbot, 1999). India has 857 cotton mills, while Pakistan has only 11.'

Similarly, there were 36 iron and steel mills, while Pakistan had none (Jan, 2010: 239). After its independence, Pakistan also faced external threats to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity from its neighbouring countries, especially India, which had reluctantly accepted Pakistan as an independent state (Ali and Patman, 2019: 1). Consequently, Pakistan adopted a state-centric national security approach to counter internal and external threats to its security (Ali and Patman, 2019). The military continued strengthening, and its role was institutionalised in internal and external policy-making.

Besides external factors, other reasons contributed to the failure of the democratic process. Khalid B. Saeed (1968) considers Jinnah's Governor Generalship and his perpetuation of powers inherited from the British government responsible for democratic failure in Pakistan. Safdar Mahmood (1994) considers the decline of the Muslim League (Jinnah's party) a significant factor which led to the failure of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan. Yonus Samad (1995: 169) explains that external factors, especially the role of the United States in boosting civilian and military bureaucracy to subdue political forces, strengthened the former at the cost of democratic forces. Similarly, Ashok Kapur (1991: 27) maintains that external factors influenced Pakistan's domestic political developments because Jinnah needed an international patron for strategic assistance. Waheed and Abbasi (2013: 203) suggest that three dimensions have made democracy inconceivable in Pakistan. The first is the presence of a land-based elitist and oligarchic culture that dominates national politics, the second is the negative perception of the people concerning democracy in Pakistan and the third is the permanent role of the military in the political process.

The failure of democracy has led scholars to call Pakistan 'a failed state', 'a garrison state', 'a rogue state' and 'a deep state'. However, these assertions have been contested, and Pakistan has been called 'a struggling nation-state' (Jan, 2010: 237). It has been demonstrated that the key reason for democratic failure is that Pakistan has succumbed to the powerful army due to its

weak political structure (Jan, 2010: 238). Is the structure a ‘cause’ which compels the military to interfere in politics, or is it an ‘effect’ of the military role in politics? There appears to be disagreement among the scholars. Military dictators believe that democracy does not work in Pakistan as it does in other parts of the world. In 2007, when we pressurised Pervez Musharraf, he told the diplomats, ‘We want democracy; I am for democracy. We want human rights and civil liberties, but we will do it our way, as we understand our society and environment better than anyone in the West’ (Gall, 2007).

The end of the last martial law in Pakistan in 2008 led many to believe that political parties have learnt from their past and will contribute to the consolidation of democracy. However, instead of democratic consolidation, democracy further eroded and led to the rise of competitive authoritarianism. Competitive authoritarian regimes, as defined earlier, are ‘civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but incumbents have significant advantages vis-a-vis their opponents’ (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 5). Using securitisation theory, we argue that incumbents defined in competitive authoritarian regimes are often securitising actors who use securitisation techniques to securitize an issue as a security threat. In competitive authoritarian regimes like Pakistan, they attempt to securitize a specific political party as a security threat. However, according to the securitisation framework, an issue may only be securitized if the audience accepts the issue as a threat. If the audience does not accept the threat as such, it is only a securitisation move, not a successful securitisation.

Securitising actors in Pakistan have attempted to depict political parties as a source of threat and instability. Historically, the securitisation strategy to beat political parties and their leaders was accepted by the audience in Pakistan. For instance, General Pervez Musharraf securitized significant political parties such as Pakistan Muslim League – N (PML-N) and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) after his martial law in October 1999. He projected them as a source of corruption and economic deterioration. The general public accepted his narrative and helped him to consolidate his authoritarian regime. However, unlike in the past, the securitising strategy by the current competitive authoritarian regime in Pakistan to oust former Prime Minister Imran Khan from politics was not accepted by the audience.

Imran Khan was removed from power through an apparent no-confidence motion on 10 April 2022. In his repeated allegations after his removal, Imran Khan blamed the leadership of the Pakistan army supported by the United States, orchestrating his removal. A day before his arrest on 9 May 2023, he reiterated his allegations and specified Major General Faisal Naseer, Director of Counterintelligence of Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency – Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI):

This man tried to kill me twice, and whenever an investigation is carried out, I will prove that it was this man. There is a whole gang with him. . . . My question is: [Despite being] a country’s ex-prime minister – because this man’s name has come forward – [why was] I unable to register a first information report (FIR)? (Dawn, 2023d)

He further alleged that despite having his party government in Punjab, he could not nominate Faisal Naseer in First Information Report (FIR).

Imran Khan’s severe allegations against the most powerful institution in the country led to his arrest on 9 May 2023. Public reaction to his arrest was, however, unprecedented. The country-wide protest turned violent, and as a result, eight people lost their lives. Around 1400 supporters of Imran Khan were arrested a day after the protest (BBC, 2023). Major international news outlets covered and reported the protest (The Tribune, 2023b). The protesters attacked the offices of Corps Commanders in Lahore, the ISI office in Rawalpindi, Air Base in Mianwali. According to the government estimate, the protest caused 2.5 billion losses to the country (ANI, 2023). The reaction to

his arrest, which turned violent, was later used as a security threat and to justify the extraordinary measures to deal with Imran Khan and his party. Imran Khan was associated with miscreants, evoking the emotions of the people. He and his party were declared to be an existential threat to the country through a series of speech acts. A military spokesman recently stated that 'this group [his party] wearing a political cloak has done what enemies could not do in 75 years' (Dawn, 2023a).

The authoritarian regime, using a securitisation strategy, established military courts under the Pakistan Army Act (PAA) and the Official Secret Act (OSA) 1923. They claimed that the court existed before the constitution and was never challenged; therefore, it empowered the army to try people who were security threats. On 30 May 2023, eight people were handed over to the army to try them in military courts (Asad and Asghar, 2023). Imran Khan was released on 29 August 2023, after his first arrest and was rearrested on the same day under the Official Secret Act-1923 in a diplomatic cypher case (The Tribune, 2023a). The government started a crackdown against his party. Almost all the top leaders of the party were arrested and sent behind bars. Only those political leaders who denounced the 9 May incident and parted ways with Imran Khan in a press conference were released. Those leaders who did not part ways with Imran Khan remained in jail despite their repeated release by different courts. They were granted bail in one case and were arrested in another case.

Conversely, elections have been delayed, and those held have been heavily manipulated. Civil liberties were suspended, and PTI was subjected to severe crackdown. Both print and electronic media were censored. The incumbent government passed numerous legislations to consolidate the autocratic regime. As we argued earlier, for a successful securitisation, it is significant that the audience accepts the securitisation moves of actors in a competitive authoritarian regime. In the case of Pakistan, we use Wertman and Kaunert's categorisation of the audience and argue that the legal audience has accepted the threat as such. Still, the political audience is not convinced by the securitisation techniques of the regime.

Legal audience

This article further divides the legal audience into legal authority and legal community. Legal authority, as stated earlier, has accepted the securitisation techniques of the government concerning Imran Khan and his political party but not the legal community. They have resisted the securitisation techniques taken by the current competitive authoritarian regime. For instance, in a convention held on 7 September 2023, the Supreme Court Bar Association maintained that the body would observe a countrywide strike to uphold the rule of law. They further demanded that the government should release the political prisoners and end the military interference in politics (Iqbal, 2023). The speakers in the convention warned that the armed forces are the creation of the constitution, and they are bound to act strictly by it. According to former legal advisor Sikander Ahmed Shah (2023), trying civilians in military courts is against international human rights law and violates the right of citizens to a fair trial. Using military courts for civilian trials not only undermines the fundamental rights of the citizens but also the due process of law, which is guaranteed in the Constitution. A senior lawyer dealing with military courts and court-martials explains the process of military courts: 'The accused who are undergoing trial are not aware of these rules that explain the process. They are not informed about their rights and obligations. Consequently, they rely on what they are told' (Sajjad, 2023). A renowned legal expert and leader of PPP moved the Supreme Court against the government's decision to try the suspects of 9 May in military courts. Similarly, the former governor of Punjab and a senior lawyer in the Supreme Court, Latif Khosa, criticised both acts and stated that they are against the fundamental rights of the citizens. However, despite the audience protest and court orders, the government has continued to detain people unlawfully.

On 26 September 2023, the court order released four women who were arrested allegedly for their involvement in the 9 May attacks on the corps commander's house in Lahore. They were rearrested immediately after their release.

Pakistan's biggest English Daily Dawn (2023b) wrote in its editorial:

ONE wonders whether all pretence of the state as a democracy has been whittled down to a point where it has simply faded away. In a democracy, where the rule of law should reign supreme, come what may, the ongoing rearrests of PTI members certainly point to such a situation.

Political audience

Similar to the legal community, the political audience (as conceptualised by Wertman and Kaunert) has also not accepted the securitisation moves of the competitive authoritarian regime in Pakistan. For instance, Imran Khan was arrested under the new legislation passed by the regime, but his support is still intact despite depicting him as a threat. In its recent report, BBC maintained that supporters of Imran Khan may be doing nothing publicly, but the strength of his 'silent support' is still visible on the ground (Khan, 2023). Despite the army crackdown against Imran Khan and his party, 61% of people, according to Gallup's survey titled Public Pulse Report (published in March 2023), still view Imran Khan as a better choice and blame the ruling coalition for the country's economic problems (Dawn, 2023c). The people may not support Imran Khan openly because this can create problems for them, but his support exists on the ground (Sareen, 2023).

An increasing number of Imran Khan's party has defected. Defections in Pakistani politics are not new, but the scale of the 'exoduses of the party leadership was unprecedented (Jamal, 2023b).' The senior leadership include former chief ministers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pervez Khattak and Mehmood Khan; former chief minister of Punjab, Sardar Usman Buzdar; former governor of Sind province, Imran Ismael; former president of Sind, Ali Zaidi, former federal information minister Fawad Chaudhry deserted the party. Despite a massive crackdown against his party and the defections of his senior party leaders, his popularity did not decline (Saeed, 2023). In a recent survey titled 'National Public Opinion Pool Report' conducted by Gallup Pakistan between 10 June and 30 June 2023, which interviewed 3500 participants from all four provinces of Pakistan, revealed that Imran Khan is still the most popular leader in Pakistan with an approval rating of 60% (Siddiqui, 2023). The survey further maintained that 59% of participants preferred Imran Khan's political party, Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI), over other parties.

According to Ayaz Amir, a retired military officer and a political analyst, the families of army officers now support Imran Khan because they do not see any alternative option (quoted in Almeida (2022)). In his interview in June 2023, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, associate professor of political economy at Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, said the resentment against the army outside Punjab had been increased for years, but now 'there is a growing perception, even in its historically most captive regions like Punjab, that the army oversteps its boundaries in the name of national security' (Asia; Nikkei, 2023). The Election Commission of Pakistan has announced that general elections may be held in January 2024. Will elections be fair and free and decide the country's future? Bilal Gilani, the executive director of Gallup Pakistan, says that the elections will not decide the future but who won the power battle – Imran Khan or the military. 'One side can bring the public out. The other side can bring the arms out' (Parkin and Bokhari, 2023).

Imran Khan has managed to get the support of the political audience. Will the public (audience) determine the transition from or to democracy in Pakistan? As demonstrated earlier, the audience plays a significant role in democratisation. Never in Pakistan's history, not at least in recent history, has the military's role been questioned the way it has been after Imran Khan's removal from power.

Despite a severe crackdown against his party and putting him behind bars, he enjoys the audience's support. One may argue that the audience support has not led to full democracy, but it has indeed stopped the transition to full authoritarianism, as demonstrated earlier.

Conclusion

The article contributes to the theoretical and empirical literature on securitisation and democratisation and applies the concept of the audience during competitive authoritarian regimes. It advances the debate of audience to democratisation and analyses the role of the legal and political audience (conceptualised by Wertman and Kaunert). The role of the audience has been used in the securitisation process but not during competitive authoritarian regimes. We demonstrate that, like the audience role in securitisation theory, the audience plays a significant role in democratic transition. If the audience does not accept securitisation actors' securitisation techniques in competitive authoritarian regimes, the regime may likely transition to democracy. The acceptance of securitisation techniques by the audience during competitive authoritarianism may transition towards consolidation of authoritarianism. Providing concrete examples from the case study of Pakistan, we explained that Pakistan qualifies for all the attributes of competitive authoritarianism. We argued that the securitising actor (military in the case of Pakistan) depicted Imran Khan and his political party as a source of threat to national security. His party faced a severe crackdown and was disallowed to organise political rallies or protests. Almost all the high-profile leaders, including him, were arrested. Only those who denounced his actions concerning the 9 May 2023 incident were freed. We demonstrated that the audience (legal) accepted the threat and passed numerous legislations to justify the crackdown against him and his party.

The article highlights that despite the authoritarian regime's attempts at securitisation through crackdowns and arrests, the general public has not been convinced. The fact that Imran Khan remains popular despite being in prison indicates that the securitisation techniques employed by the regime have not been effective in swaying public opinion. This suggests a lack of legitimacy for the regime's actions in the eyes of the public. This lack of acceptance can potentially contribute to the possibility of a democratic transition in the competitive authoritarian regime. If the general public continues to resist and reject the securitisation measures, it could pave the way for a shift towards a more democratic system, as the regime's authority and control might be challenged and undermined by the public's refusal to comply.

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