

## Social Media Activism for Civilian Supremacy in Myanmar and Pakistan

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### Summary

In Myanmar and Pakistan, anti-democratic forces including an alliance of military and right-wing political factions are dominating political affairs despite both countries' constitutions defining democratic processes. Consequently, the authoritarian rule has been looming in these countries. The above forces have kept tight control over traditional media (television, print) by silencing the voices of common people using force and violence. However, social media has empowered pro-civilian rule activists to raise their voices and has helped to mobilise the public in favour of political change in their societies. How are these activists using social media to bring political change in Myanmar and Pakistan? This policy brief seeks answers to this question by examining the activism of political and civil society activists on social media in Myanmar and Pakistan. The brief explains the methods, strategies, and their impact on political and social space in Pakistani and Myanmar societies.

### Introduction

Any form of democratic politics needs to engage with the emerging means of media to develop the force of a civilian political leadership. Regardless of one's political association, within the span of a few months the [Pakistan Democratic Movement](#) (PDM) and [Civil Disobedience Movement](#) (CDM) Myanmar significantly influenced the political dynamics of their countries. In the view of the online activism pro-civilian supremacy activists (as discussed in this policy brief), the core contribution of PDM and CDM is to give political voice

to, and make visible, fundamental chasms in the political systems of Myanmar and Pakistan that systematically retard the country's socio-economic and political development. The activism of the PDM and the CDM on social media has significantly exposed the [disconnection](#) between de jure power (a form of power which is constitutionally legitimate) and de facto power (a form of power which practically governs).<sup>1</sup> Around [one dozen political parties](#) formed the PDM in September 2020, and the PDM campaigned in all major cities (e.g., Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, and Islamabad) of Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> The political parties in the PDM included Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (a Deobandi Sunni Muslim's religio-political party), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Sharif (a centre-right political party) and Pakistan People Party (a centre-left political party), along with other regional political factions from Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.<sup>3</sup>

In Myanmar, the Civil Disobedience Movement is mainly operated by political activists of the [National Democratic League](#) which was removed from government in February 2021 by the military dictator. After this military takeover, the activists, in unity, turned to social media to plan, coordinate and hold offline political demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> People from different sections of society like doctors, teachers, musicians, and civil servants refused to work under military rule as a symbol of protest. They mostly employed [nonviolent methods](#) of protest (except anti-military [People's Defence Force](#) armed wing of monks) which included acts of civil disobedience, labour strikes, a military boycott campaign, a pot-banging movement (banging pots and pans in protest), a red ribbon campaign (tying and displaying of red balloons on houses and streets as a form of resistance), public protests, and formal recognition of the election results by elected representatives. Many protesters dressed in the colour red, which is associated with the National Democratic League.<sup>5</sup>

Despite regime restrictions on conventional media, [social media](#) (mainly [Facebook](#), Twitter and YouTube) has given freedom to pro-democracy activists to raise their voices against the despotic rule in Myanmar and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Their social media activism involved the creation of hashtags, pages, posts, groups, online status and trends. This policy brief discusses the data from social media (newspapers, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and integrates the activists of the PDM and the CDM as pro-democracy activists. In relation to this activism, the brief offers an analysis of the questions: how do pro-democracy activists use social media to foster civilian supremacy in Myanmar and Pakistan? What is the impact of social media activism on democratic and constitutional development in Myanmar and Pakistan? This

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<sup>1</sup> Azhar, & Khan. Democracy and Development: Why Pakistan Democratic Movement Matters? *Naya Daur Media*. 15 November 2020. <https://nayadaur.tv/15-Nov-2020/democracy-and-development-why-pakistan-democratic-movement-matters>

<sup>2</sup> Kugelman, Michael. Pakistan's Anti-Government Movement May Hit the Brick Wall of the Security State. *Foreign Policy*. 27 October 2020,

<sup>3</sup> Dawn News. 'Selected will have to go now,' says Aseefa Bhutto-Zardari at political debut in Multan. 30 November 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1593235>

<sup>4</sup> Walker, Tommy. How Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement Is Pushing Back Against the Coup. 27 February 2021. *Voice of America* (East Asia Pacific).

<sup>5</sup> Walsh, Carly and Sharma, Akanksha. *Protests break out in Myanmar in defiance of military coup*. CNN World. 7 February 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/06/asia/protests-myanmar-military-coup-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Dobson, John. Coup in Myanmar poses a challenging dilemma for its neighbours. *Sunday Guardian*. 13 March 2021.

brief offers key takeaways for tech companies, policy makers and actors working for the promotion of democracy and constitutional rights in authoritarian regimes.

## The Background and Context

The people of Myanmar and Pakistan (both former British colonies in east and south Asia) have endured the direct and indirect influence of their militaries in running political affairs since their independence in 1948 and 1947 respectively. And the military-supported rulers in both countries utilise national media and civil administration to suppress democratic and civilian supremacy movements, a model of rule termed a [civilian-military hybrid regime](#).<sup>7</sup> In this context of militaries meddling in politics in Myanmar and Pakistan, this policy brief compares and examines the use of new media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) in both countries for the civilian supremacy and rule.

In Myanmar, military influence started in March 1962 when the then military's General Ne Win unconstitutionally seized political control of Myanmar and since then the government has been under direct or indirect control by the military junta. Almost all aspects of Myanmar's society (business, media, agriculture production) have been exclusively controlled by the military and the military-supported elite civilian leaders.<sup>8</sup> The current pro-democracy movement (the CDM) is not the first in the country's history. The people of Myanmar resisted oppressive [British colonial rule](#) in the 1920s. They refused to pay tax to the colonial administrators, boycotted trade with the British government, and refused to obey court orders.<sup>9</sup> The CDM could be a similar resistance against oppressive military rule. Just as Myanmar's people today boycott cigarettes, beer, and telecommunication services owned by the military, people in the 1920s boycotted imported products or burned them in protest at [colonial rule](#).<sup>10</sup> During the year of 1988, similar student-led uprising erupted against the military dictatorship but that uprising failed to achieve its goal – keeping the military at bay from civilian government matters.<sup>11</sup> In 2007, the monk-led “Saffron Revolution” against the military's economic policies attracted international attention, but was suppressed through blocking internet ISPs in the entire country. This blocking prevented the voices of the protesters from reaching the outside world.<sup>12</sup> Although Suu Kyi's five years (2016-2021) as a civilian head of government had been relatively democratic, Suu never condemned the systemic genocide of ethnic minority Rohingyas. The repressive colonial-era laws were used against the Rohingyas with impunity.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this time the Civil Disobedience Movement is (CDM) seems more persuasive in reaching out to the

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<sup>7</sup> Mishra, Anish. Regime oscillations in Myanmar. *The Express Tribune Pakistan*. 23 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Thant, Myint-U. *The river of lost footsteps: Histories of Burma*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The Irrawaddy (southeast Asian news website). *The Long History of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement*. 29 March 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/long-history-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement.html>

<sup>10</sup> Refer to the footnote 9.

<sup>11</sup> May, Ron. Analysing recent events in Burma. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 44, no. 3. 1990: 291-294.

<sup>12</sup> Chowdhury, Mridul, *The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution*. Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2008-8. 2008. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1537703>

<sup>13</sup> Cagape, Wendell Gleen P. Denial of the Rohingya Genocide: Problematising Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rule of Law in Postcolonial Myanmar. *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 10, no. 2. 176-198. 2020.

world using social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter. Social media is more important for them because it helps them to plan and organise offline protests and demonstrations.<sup>14</sup>

CDM emerged when on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021 the country's military generals toppled the [constitutionally elected](#) government of Suu Kyi following corruption allegations. Suu Kyi had already spent more than 15 years under house arrest (during 1990s and 2000s) under the previous military rules.<sup>15</sup> In reaction to the military's assault against the civilian government, civil society activists and supporters of civilian rule (mostly CDM activists) in Myanmar expressed their concerns that the military junta was trying to isolate the country's population from the rest of the world by shutting off internet and cutting mobile internet nationwide. The activists mobilised the common people by initiating social media hashtags like [#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#).<sup>16</sup>

Since its independence from British India in 1947, Pakistan has been ruled by military dictators for over 30 of the country's 75 years life. They have manipulated the election process and created constitutional clauses to justify their authoritarian rule (directly and indirectly) Such military interventions into Pakistan's politics imply that Pakistani voters have fewer chances to deliver message to politicians about their performance.<sup>17</sup>

After 10 years of military rule (1958-1968), a mass resistance movement against military dictator Ayub Khan forced him to resign. Nonetheless, power was transferred to General Yahya Khan who became chief martial law administrator and president of Pakistan until 1971 when parliamentary elections reinstated a democratic government.<sup>18</sup> In the 1980s, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was another uprising against the military dictator President General Zia. MRD was a multiparty alliance including the left-leaning parties Pakistan People's Party (also part of the current PDM movement), Pakistan National Party, National Democratic Party and the right-leaning factions like Pakistan Democratic Party and Jamiat Ulema Islam (also part of in the PDM). The MRD ended after parliamentary elections in 1988, after Zia's death in a plane crash.<sup>19</sup> The most recent mass movement, from March 2007 to February 2008, was in opposition to Pervez Musharraf, a military dictator since 1999. This anti-Musharraf movement demanded the independent judiciary and transparent democracy for a clean break from the military's role in politics and [institutional supremacy and democratic consolidation](#). Nearly all political parties and civil society members united against the Musharraf dictatorship and the movement succeeded in electing a democratic government in 2008.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rao, Anuradha, Atmakuri, Archana. *The Role of Social Media in Myanmar's CDM: Strengths, Limitations and Perspectives from India*. Working Papers. Institute of South Asian Studies Singapore. 28 October 2021. DOI: 10.48561/3hfw-qddb.

<sup>15</sup> Mizzima News. (15 March 2021) "Suu Kyi to face court". <https://mizzima.com/article/suu-kyi-face-court>

<sup>16</sup> Fortify Rights. Facebook post. 17 March 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/FortifyRights/posts/1649909478541161>.

<sup>17</sup> Akhtar, A. Sajjad. *The politics of common sense: State, society and culture in Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ali, Tariq. *The duel: Pakistan on the flight path of American power*. Simon and Schuster. 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Paracha, F. Nadeem. The 1983 MRD Movement: The flasher's version. *The Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1208863>

<sup>20</sup> Fruman, Sheila. *Will the Long March to Democracy in Pakistan Finally Succeed?* US Institute of Peace. 2011.

In the above context, Pakistan's Democratic Movement (PDM) emerged against the military establishment's role in Pakistani politics. The PDM claimed that successive civilian leaders come into power through the clandestine support of the establishment (a reciprocal relationship of military, judiciary, and media platforms with the elite ruling class). Fazlur Rehman, one of the PDM's leaders, called such leaders an [unconstitutional government](#) which is imposed on Pakistani people by the army generals.<sup>21</sup> The PDM leaders claimed when the establishment is unhappy with their stance on civilian prime minister-led policy making and governance, the establishment ousts them without letting them complete their [tenure of government](#).<sup>22</sup> The former prime minister Nawaz Sharif accused the military establishment of violating the country's constitution when his government was toppled in 2018. In a political speech, Nawaz spoke, "I am being labelled as a traitor right now because I talk of the constitution and democracy."<sup>23</sup>

## Pros and Cons of Using Social Media

Social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube can be a source of information and connection. They help their users connect with friends around the world and follow the latest information, and they can express their opinions with freedom and ease. They also facilitate greater free speech, transparency and make the world feel more connected.<sup>24</sup> Due to these benefits that make us social, despite being physically far away from each other, social media has gained mass popularity and acquisition in recent decades, even in highly regime-controlled societies including Myanmar and Pakistan. Along with the benefits, social media space, especially Facebook and Twitter, has become a tool that can be weaponized by those with a mass reach through media, like the Myanmar military. In 2014, around 1% of Myanmar's 53 million population had internet access, and in 2016 the country appeared to have more Facebook users than any other southeast Asian country. Today, more than [19 million](#) of its citizens use Facebook.<sup>25</sup> Having access to the attention of millions of citizens and infiltrating the citizens' feeds by feeding them state-mandated news and propaganda permits the news to circulate quickly before it is even verified. This has set a dangerous precedent not just for Myanmar but for social media in general, because such bad actors can

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<sup>21</sup> Bhatti, Omer. Notes From the Ground: PDM Lahore Jalsa Draws Diverse Crowd. *Naya Daur*. 14 December 2020. <https://navadaur.tv/2020/12/notes-from-the-ground-pdm-lahore-jalsa-draws-diverse-crowd/>

<sup>22</sup> This stance of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) was in relation to the military supported government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its leader Mr Imran Khan. However, in April 2022 the PDM came to power after dissolving the government of Imran Khan through no-confidence motion in the Parliament. Later, Imran Khan claimed that the PDM and military collaborated to remove him from prime ministership. The PTI led by Imran Khan adopted the same narrative as of the PDM such as Khan alleged that the PDM and the military together conspired against him and his government. Although the aggressive stance of Khan towards military's meddling into politics was more prominent and impactful but this policy brief focuses on the activism of the PDM.

<sup>23</sup> Baloch, M. Shah, and Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. Pakistan's united opposition protests against Imran Khan's rule. *The Guardian*. October 17, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/16/pakistans-united-opposition-protests-against-imran-khans-rule>

<sup>24</sup> Sivapalan, Nimalen and Jamil, Shoumik. The role of technology and social media in the Rohingya refugee crisis. *The Bengal Gazette*. 4 August 2020. <https://bengalgazette.org/2020/08/04/the-role-of-technology-and-social-media-in-the-rohingya-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>25</sup> DataReportal. *Global Digital Insights Facebook users in Myanmar in 2022*. <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-myanmar>.

spread hatred and spread incendiary messages for offline [ethnic cleansing](#) as occurred to Myanmar's Rohingya.<sup>26</sup> The Rohingya were targeted in a brutal army Operation Clean campaign in 2017 that drove more than 700,000 Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh. The International Court of Justice has been hearing a case arguing the army's actions constituted genocide because the Myanmar's soldiers raped, executed and assaulted the Rohingya. In 2018, Facebook removed several accounts linked to Myanmar's military because their content appeared to fuel hatred toward the Muslim Rohingya minority.<sup>27</sup>

In Pakistan, the government arrested social media activists for posting content against the military establishment under Pakistan's anti-terrorism laws. For example, a social media (Facebook and Twitter) activist was abducted by secret agencies. Earlier the activist had written on social media that "every institution in the country should work within its [constitutional ambit](#), the establishment should do its job, the judiciary and parliament should do their duties because interference within each other's boundaries creates defects." He asserted that it has been more than 73 years since Pakistan was established but we are yet to decide whether to [run a system of democracy or run affairs through dictatorship](#). The government also released the list of journalists alleging they were involved in corruption especially those who have their YouTube channels. The journalists contended that after forcing the mainstream media into silence, the regime wants to silence the people on social media.<sup>28</sup>

## Social Media Activism in Pakistan

The pro-democracy activists of the Pakistan Democratic Movement started a debate on social media platforms about the role of Pakistan's military leadership in national policy making in the interest of the country and people. [Many users on social media](#) raised the question that shaping foreign policy through developing friendly relations with neighbouring countries, such as Afghanistan and India, is the responsibility of the civilian leadership.<sup>29</sup> According to the Constitution of Pakistan, it is not the responsibility of the Army Chief to formulate policies about internal political and economic matters and foreign relations. A social media user referred to this role as "It is not your responsibility but the elected representatives of the people. Your job is to protect the house [Pakistan's borders]".<sup>30</sup> An activist argued on Facebook (in Urdu language) that the Army's senior officials want to retain their supremacy over parliament and the judiciary through a systematic agenda. They devise policies to control civilian institutions and they execute

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<sup>26</sup> Mozur, Paul. A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military. *New York Times*. 15 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

<sup>27</sup> Kironka, Kristina & Peng, Ni-Ni. How state-run media shape perceptions: an analysis of the projection of the Rohingya in the Global New Light of Myanmar, *South East Asia Research* 29:1. 16-31. 2021. 10.1080/0967828X.2020.1850178.

<sup>28</sup> Naya Daur Media. PTI Attacking Naya Daur Another Sign of Its Fascist Tendencies. Facebook video. 5 December 2020. <https://fb.watch/emDqq3291M/>.

<sup>29</sup> BBC News. General Qamar Javed Bajwa's address: Comparison and debate in statements made by army chief and Nawaz Sharif on social media. 18 March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-56444746?>

<sup>30</sup> Enlightened Pakistan. @OurEnlightenedPakistan. Facebook post. 20 March 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/OurEnlightenedPakistan/posts/1380733242291452>



their policies through intimidating civilian institutions and departments. This process has continued since 1958 when the Army first declared Martial Law in Pakistan.<sup>31</sup>

To reinforce their argument, the activists shared the statements of the former military general on social media regarding clandestine launching of political leaders of their own choice in the country. An activist shared a video on Facebook of a statement made by an ex-military official ([Amjad Shuaib](#)) in which the ex-official claimed that the military had launched selected political leaders in Pakistan including the former prime ministers Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and the ex-President Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari. The activists raised a question on Facebook: "Is there any doubt after this confessional statement that the military is responsible for the political instability in the country?".<sup>32</sup> [translated from Urdu]

The activists also publicised interview statements of civilian leaders regarding undue interference by military officials in matters of civilian institutions. These statements indicated that military generals drive civilian leaders of their own choice. However, when those leaders are in power, the generals interfere in the policy making and governing matters of the country. When [civilian rulers resist military interference](#) in national political matters, the generals, directly or indirectly, topple civilian government and again manipulate elections in favour of their chosen political leaders (e.g., the Prime Minister Imran Khan). Regarding this situation, an activist shared the interview message (in Urdu) in which former prime minister [Nawaz Sharif said](#):

I don't accept any army chief as the super prime minister. Are these army generals 'thekedar' (self-proclaimed custodians) of Pakistan? They jump into every [civilian] matter. Why not they remain in their constitutional limits? Why not they allow the functioning of prime ministers and their governments?<sup>33</sup> [Translated from Urdu language].

International media livestreamed the PDM jalsas on their social media pages especially Facebook and Twitter. For instance, BBC Urdu posted the main heading on their Facebook live page that PDM would hold an anti-government jalsa in Pakistan's biggest city Karachi.<sup>34</sup> One of the activists while referring to huge gatherings at the PDM jalsas wrote on Facebook, "I don't support PMLN [Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz], I'm siding with democracy, pluralism, secularism & rule of law. But look at the verdict of the people."<sup>35</sup>

A social media activist shared a post on Facebook that Pakistan's constitution does not allow the tradition of bestowing housing and agricultural property from the [state-owned land](#) to retired judges and military personnel. The activist posted a note from a Supreme Court

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<sup>31</sup> Enlightened Pakistan (21 April 2021). Facebook handle @OurEnlightenedPakistan. <https://www.facebook.com/OurEnlightenedPakistan/posts/1403269536704489>

<sup>32</sup> Enlightened Pakistan. @OurEnlightenedPakistan. Facebook video. 18 April 2021. <https://fb.watch/emDC7WTXIG/>.

<sup>33</sup> Only Democracy. @onlydemocracy1. Facebook video. 17 March 2020. <https://fb.watch/5pafyUPFWf/>

<sup>34</sup> BBC Urdu. Facebook livestreaming video. 18 October 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/126548377386804/videos/446801779619231>.

<sup>35</sup> Godmade. (Facebook handle @AnAdminHasNoName). Facebook video. 7 November 2020. <https://fb.watch/emE23n3dMR/>

Judge regarding free land, seeking privileges from Pakistan's retired military personnel. The screenshot of the note has been shared on [Facebook](#) where it received around 200 comments, 1000 likes, and 200 shares. The note observed:

When General Gracey was commanding Pakistan's Army, [a junior military officer] General Mohammad Ayub Khan [imposed first Martial law in 1958 in Pakistan] approached him with a request for a plot but he was rebuffed by the Army Chief; ironically a British officer preserved #Pakistan's land from a son of the soil [a self-proclaimed patriotic phrase of the military establishment].<sup>36</sup>

The activists have been pushing for the accountability of military officials who are posted to high ranking civilian jobs. An activist shared the details which Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) received from international donors to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and provide vaccinations to Pakistani people. The activist claimed on Facebook that the Chairman of the NDMA (a military General), was asked by the World Health Organisation to provide evidence of donor money spending on COVID-related measures. Instead of producing the evidence, the General opted to retire from the chairmanship and gave up his current military perks.<sup>37</sup> The activists also created memes on social media. For example, one of the activists shared a meme on Facebook which reads, "If the Mullah (clergy) is restricted to a mosque and military is restricted to the borders, then 99% of the problems of the country (Pakistan) would be resolved on their own accord."<sup>38</sup> Activists have been highlighting the exclusive privileges and luxuries of Pakistani rulers at the expense of the national economy. A video report on the privileges of Pakistani elites was viewed by more than 1500 users on Facebook.<sup>39</sup> Earlier the Al Jazeera newspaper published a written [report](#) in which it revealed that economic privileges accorded to Pakistan's elite class, including the corporate sector, feudal landlords, the political class and the country's powerful military, add up to an estimated \$17.4 billion (6 percent of the country's economy).<sup>40</sup>

The social media activists also exposed the names of military personnel who were involved in curbing the freedom of mainstream media, social media, and parliament in Islamabad. For instance, an activist shared on Facebook the names of the two colonels who ordered the abduction and violent treatment of pro-civilian supremacy journalists in Islamabad. The activist shamed them that if they are not involved in civilian matters they should answer for their actions, "otherwise do not say on media that we are not involved in politics" [translated from Urdu].<sup>41</sup> They also criticised the involvement of military officials in

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<sup>36</sup> Facebook handle @MohammadJibranNasir. Facebook post. 9 October 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/MohammadJibranNasir/posts/1582949488566585>

<sup>37</sup> Only Democracy. @onlydemocracy1 · Facebook post. April 29, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/onlydemocracy1/posts/1417870015234936>

<sup>38</sup> Rationalist Society of Pakistan. Facebook Group post. 21 April 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/rationalistspk/permalink/10165059008980173/>

<sup>39</sup> *Pakistani elite, information taken from Aljazeera report*. Facebook video. 17 April 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/SohailYosafzai1/videos/589695461990622>.

<sup>40</sup> Hashim, Asad. Elite privilege consumes \$17.4bn of Pakistan's economy: UNDP. 13 April 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/13/elite-privilege-consumes-17-4bn-of-pakistans-economy-undp>

<sup>41</sup> Facebook post. 14 December 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/sharmeen.bukhari.146/posts/816827392505694>.



property and commercial businesses including educational, health, food industry and construction companies. An activist commented on Facebook, “successful societies know that those who fight wars well are not always best suited for running industries, academia, or government. It is broadly realised that men in uniform can be heroic fighters in wartime but in other situations they can be just as clueless and bureaucratic as their civilian counterparts”.<sup>42</sup>

In April 2021, amid increasing criticism of Pakistan’s military establishment on social media, Pakistan’s Parliament [passed a law](#) which criminalised the criticism of the armed forces, such as online criticism of the military generals’ unconstitutional actions. Those who did so could be imprisoned for up to two years or fined. In reaction to this law, a journalist posted on Facebook, “You are free to criticise democracy, you are free to criticise Parliament, you are free to criticise politicians, you are free to criticise media, rest is national interest”.<sup>43</sup> Another social media user posted a message on the page Enlightened Pakistan that Pakistan’s military has been keeping active conflict with our neighbouring countries (Afghanistan and India) to maintain their hegemony over Pakistan’s civilian institutions and common people. They interfere into politics, governance, and state policies so that the military’s high officials could seek more power, wealth, and control over country’s resources. The activist wrote, “our generals have given their personal interests as national interest and have put the name of their personal security as national security” [translated from Urdu].<sup>44</sup> Activists also attempted to break the symbiotic relationship of the military establishment with the right-wing clergy. For example, the recent violent protests of a religious faction Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in the country and the controversial role of army generals in launching TLP as a political faction in the country against democratic political parties in 2018 general elections has been discussed on YouTube. [This video](#) has attracted around 47000 views, 1300 “likes” and 400 comments.<sup>45</sup>

## Social Media Activism in Myanmar

Myanmar’s activists have been using online space to debate the conditions intensifying the civilian supremacy movement and the violent suppression of this movement by the military authorities. Through these online discussions, they requested that the international community support their voice for democratic rule in the country. For instance, on 18 March 2021, an event “Nikkei Asia webinar - Myanmar's coup: How should the world react?” was organised on YouTube (with more than 38,000 views) in which expert panel members discussed the implications of sanctions imposed by Western governments.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Facebook handle @HoodbhoyFanClub. *A military is only for war*. Facebook post. 10 October 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/HoodbhoyFanClub/posts/3152011711577660>.

<sup>43</sup> Pakistan Tribune. (Facebook handle @paktribune.pk) Facebook post. 8 April 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/paktribune.pk/posts/170393344937149>.

<sup>44</sup> Enlightened Pakistan. (Facebook handle @OurEnlightenedPakistan). Facebook post. 13 December 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/OurEnlightenedPakistan/photos/a.431328517231934/1313049412393169/>

<sup>45</sup> ] Banning Tehreek-e-labbaik Pakistan? What May Happen? YouTube video. 17 April 2021. [https://youtu.be/t\\_XJGKOGAiE?t=256](https://youtu.be/t_XJGKOGAiE?t=256).

<sup>46</sup> Nikkei News. Nikkei Asia Webinar - Myanmar's coup: How should the world react? 18 March 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdEyuic\\_SrM&ab\\_channel=NikkeiAsia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdEyuic_SrM&ab_channel=NikkeiAsia)

In Myanmar, a pro-democracy activist wrote on Twitter, “a [group of 30 Indian](#) Flag of India scholars, writers, jurists & civil society members have asked external affairs minister @DrSJaishankar to ensure that democracy is restored in the #Myanmar & urge Indian companies to suspend all commercial ties w/ MEC & MEH.”<sup>47</sup> “We need not only targeted sanctions but support plans for businesses that do not work with or are not related to the cronies in the military businesses.”<sup>48</sup>

On the other side, Asian youth diaspora initiated a global online solidarity campaign for Myanmar democracy which was reinforced by international civil society activists. The campaign aimed to press the United Nations forum by arguing that U.N. member states must recognise Myanmar’s elected civilian leaders because the military junta is illegal and is committing crimes against civilians. “If the military succeeds with this coup, it will also embolden other militaries in fragile democracies to either commit atrocities against minorities/occupied peoples or to launch their own coups”, wrote one of the activists on Facebook.<sup>49</sup> International civil society activists gave a call for global protest in 12 June 2021 and encouraged other activists to organise protests in their cities and countries worldwide to push the G7 and NATO countries to act for the civilian rule in Myanmar.<sup>50</sup>

In Myanmar activists shamed the military junta for the increase in prices since the military coup. Even basic staples, such as a bowl of dried fish, have become too expensive for many people in Myanmar.<sup>51</sup> The activists appreciated the pro-democracy supporters by saying, “Stay united. Keep fighting. Keep winning.” Another activist commented “Shame to Junta” referring to the arrests of the activists who have been participating in pro-democracy protests.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, the campaigners for civilian supremacy in Myanmar pressed the Australian government to sanction the generals who had engineered February’s coup and the businesses which sustain the military regime. Civil society organisations inside Myanmar wrote an open letter to the Australian foreign minister urging Australia to impose new sanctions to delegitimise the military regime and squeeze its sources of foreign funding. The letter stated, “We 390 civil society organisations across Myanmar are shocked by Australia’s continued inaction on Myanmar, which emboldens the terrorist military junta”.<sup>53</sup> The protestors held anti-Chevron protests in Washington by claiming that Chevron, an oil energy giant, is funding the military regime of Myanmar against the civilian

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<sup>47</sup> Twitter handle @thinzhashunleiyi. Twitter post. 31 May 2021a.

<https://mobile.twitter.com/thinzhashunleiyi/status/1399268814332698625>

<sup>48</sup> Twitter handle @thinzhashunleiyi. Twitter post. 31 May 2021b.

<https://twitter.com/thinzhashunleiyi/status/1399068449129725952?s=20>.

<sup>49</sup> Facebook post. 17 March 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/lisa.schirch/posts/10161072763734546:1>.

<sup>50</sup> *Burma/Myanmar needs your help Support for Democracy in Myanmar*. Facebook group. 19 May 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/454041768974573/permalink/514943356217747/>

<sup>51</sup> CNA Media (@ChannelNewsAsia). Facebook post. 28 May 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/ChannelNewsAsia/posts/10158327446892934>.

<sup>52</sup> *International Support for Myanmar Democracy*. Facebook group. 28 May 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/944270013069654/permalink/1016265085870146/>

<sup>53</sup> Doherty, Ben. ‘Shameful inaction’: Myanmar civil groups urge Australia to sanction coup generals. *The Guardian*. 30 March 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/may/18/shameful-inaction-myanmar-civil-groups-urge-australia-to-sanction-coup-generals>

population of the country. The video of the protest has been viewed around 4,000 times on Facebook.<sup>54</sup>

Myanmar's diaspora forum Sisters 2 Sisters, led by women, initiated a Sisters Global Campaign. They wrote letters in Burmese and English and emailed them to Myanmar into the hands of the female detainees and/or their families to show solidarity with their activism for democracy in Myanmar.<sup>55</sup> They also used hashtags like #myanmarcoup and #sisters2sisters to express a form of resistance to military oppression.<sup>56</sup>

## Impact of Social Media Activism on Politics of Myanmar and Pakistan

### Impact on Pakistani society

The social media activism of pro-democracy activists of Myanmar and Pakistan implies that there can be impactful scope for the Pakistan Democratic Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement of Myanmar to steadily work for relatively more empowered civilian governments there. In November 2021, Pakistan's parliament passed a law which criminalises the practice of enforced disappearances by security agencies of pro-democracy activists in Pakistan. This could be an outcome of the [pressure](#) of national and international human rights and democracy activists. The Balochistan High Court declared the formation of the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) Act as void in response to a constitutional petition filed by a concerned lawyer who had challenged the DHA Act 2015 in the Court. The Court termed the Act as null and void, on the grounds that it violates the Constitution of Pakistan because only the Federal and Provincial civilian government can acquire land in the interest of citizens.<sup>57</sup> In July 2022, the military leadership ordered the key commanders and officers to stay away from political activities such as meeting with politicians. This was possible due to social media campaign in favour of stronger civilian rule in the country.<sup>58</sup> More, recently, [Islamabad High Court](#) also declared that Pakistan's Armed Forces has no constitutional jurisdiction, directly or indirectly, to engage in business ventures of any kind outside its organisation nor to assert the ownership of state land. It has been widely discussed on [Facebook](#) by the pro-democracy activists.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Facebook handle @adb.dcma. *Anti Dictatorship in Burma - DC Metro Area*. Facebook video. 27 May 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/adb.dcma/videos/889114515000219>.

<sup>55</sup> *Support for Democracy in Myanmar*. Facebook group. 27 May 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/454041768974573/permalink/517476169297799/>.

<sup>56</sup> Twitter handle @randallbreanna. 25 May 2021. <https://twitter.com/randallbreanna/status/1397029271768428549>.

<sup>57</sup> Shahid, Saleem. BHC declares clauses of Quetta DHA Act unconstitutional. *Dawn News*. 17 December 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1596185>.

<sup>58</sup> Siddiqui A. Zain. Spymaster directs intelligence officers to stay away from political activities *The Express Tribune Pakistan*. 5 July 2022. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2364633/spymaster-directs-intelligence-officers-to-stay-away-from-political-activites>.

<sup>59</sup> Dekhlo. Facebook page. 13 July 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/DekhloTv/posts/pfbid0bAGkgZ3wBkJaVTeuwVgLSStbeSZywKKkoce-mRhP5yocckyL3U6TCyZXVhTj5cCoKbl>.

## Impact on Myanmar society

In Myanmar, Facebook banned all accounts linked to Myanmar's military as well as advertisements from military-controlled companies after the military takeover of the country. Facebook termed the post-coup situation in Myanmar as an "emergency" explaining that the ban was triggered by incidents since the coup, including violence against civilians. Facebook banned the Facebook accounts of military-controlled Myawaddy TV and state television MRTV.<sup>60</sup> A United Nations investigator urged the international community to take action against Myanmar's military regime by referring to video (made by democracy activists) as evidence of security forces violence against protestors, including indiscriminate firing into civilian homes.<sup>61</sup> In May 2021, the energy giants Chevron and Total SA suspended partial payments from a gas pipeline project in Myanmar to stop funding to the country's military junta which is involved in human rights violations of the county's civilian population.<sup>62</sup> As discussed previously, this could be in response to the protests of democracy activists against Chevron's payments to the unconstitutional government of military generals. In February 2022, the [European Union](#) and [Australia](#) imposed restricted measures on 22 individuals and four business entities linked to the supporter of Myanmar's military actions against the civilian population of the country. This was [welcomed](#) by the democracy activists of Myanmar.<sup>63</sup>

## Key Takeaways

By synthesising the analysis of social media activism for bringing social and political change in Myanmar and Pakistan, this policy brief offers some takeaways for policy makers, civil society, and civilian leaders. This synthesis indicates that social media is used actively for civilian supremacy in both countries and almost in similar ways, like public mobilisation through constitutional awareness. The analysis of two countries in this policy brief also affirm the military influence in political matters and the negative impact of this influence on democracy and public welfare.

## Voicing socio-economic concerns

The pro-civilian supremacy activists should inform and help mobilise the public around common issues persisting in authoritarian and military regimes. For example, the high inflation rate, unemployment, poverty, lack of justice and freedom of expression are genuine popular concerns of almost all common people. The activists and their civilian leaders can

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<sup>60</sup> The Diplomat. *Facebook Bans All Myanmar Military-Linked Accounts and Ads*. 25 February 2021. <https://the-diplomat.com/2021/02/facebook-bans-all-myanmar-military-linked-accounts-and-ads/>

<sup>61</sup> Schlein, Lisa. UN Official Calls for Coordinated International Action to Oust Myanmar Coup Leaders. *Voice of America*. 12 March 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/un-official-calls-coordinated-international-action-oust-myanmar-coup-leaders>

<sup>62</sup> HRW [Human Rights Watch] Myanmar: *Chevron, Total Suspend Some Payments to Junta*. 28 May 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/28/myanmar-chevron-total-suspend-some-payments-junta>

<sup>63</sup> Facebook handle @representativemawhtun · Politician). Facebook post. 22 February 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/representativemawhtun/posts/pfbid0GV1z5XUWXTTD6CA86i48GvBeYFgszoKrjsVx8xLJ1sgptJjztsrf4tucDASi3WnPl>

achieve their goals of political change by mass mobilisation of ordinary citizens in their countries.

### **Engaging suppressed minorities**

Pro-democracy activists should engage with suppressed ethnic, religious, and gender minorities to amplify the voice of the movements working on pro-civilian rule and primacy. Under non-civilian rule, these minorities could be the main victims of social exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice. Democracy movement leaders, such as the PDM and the CDM, could engage effectively the ethnic and religious minorities from smaller provinces to increase their strength.

### **Reporting anti-civilian propaganda to tech companies**

Tech companies occasionally take proactive actions to block and ban the social media accounts linked to undemocratic governments which are used to spread propaganda and hateful material. However, the pro-democracy leaders and activists should report such online accounts which spread hateful, violent, and anti-democratic information. This reporting can effectively counter despotic ideologies which are used to spread fake political propaganda among common people in the name of good governance and patriotism.

### **Engaging intellectuals**

Intellectuals are key to any society which is suffering from political, social, and economic stagnation. Their participation in democratic movements is crucial and can be an effective tool for building people power for social change and civilian rule. Although the PDM and the CDM were successful in involving lawyers, journalists, and academics, they could increase the inclusion of professional associations like associations of physicians, engineers, and academics.

### **Educating people on their constitutional rights**

The pro-civilian rule movements, such as the PDM and the CDM, emerge, mobilise, and sustain themselves on the principle of constitutional rule and supremacy under the civilian political leadership. They should spread the words of specific constitutional provision (like articles, clauses) in their speeches and messages so that common people get an understanding of what their country's constitution says and how the de facto political conditions persist. This awareness can be catalyst for political mobilisation of neutral people, even those who cannot read and write.

In conclusion, social media has become an emerging power for citizens who use it to raise their voice against those forces (e.g., military dictators) in their countries and societies. They can now resist and change the unconstitutional and tyrannical rule in their societies for a just and democratic governance.

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