

## Discursive Construction of Political Legitimacy on Social Media: A Critical Discourse Study of Twitter/X Narratives in South Asia

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### Abstract

In the present day, South Asian politics has seen a shift towards virtualization of political contestation, with algorithmic social media platforms emerging as the major terrain for the construction, contestation and subversion of democratic legitimacy. Drawing on the theory of cultural hegemony, Antonio Gramsci; the concept of public sphere, Jürgen Habermas; and subaltern counter-publics, Nancy Fraser, the study is qualitative and uses Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore digital narratives from three high-stakes geopolitical crises: the Indian Farmers' Protests (2020-2024), Pakistan's Regime Change (2022), and the Bangladesh July Revolution (2024) to see how state apparatuses use digital architectures to impose hegemony by paternalistic othering, legal-rational framing, and computational propaganda. At the same time, the study explores the ways that the marginalized civic networks are able to invert these state-sponsored discourses by returning derogatory terms to their own usage, the deployment of somatic imagery, and through transnational connective action. The results show an extremely ambivalent situation, in which the digital public sphere in South Asia is being subjected to a process of 'digital re-feeding' by the state, even as digital political hegemonies are always fragile and susceptible to the resilient and decentralized contestation of digital counter-publics.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Legitimacy, Twitter/X, Subaltern Counter-Publics, Digital Authoritarianism, South Asia, Cultural Hegemony.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The digital politics of South Asia is the subject of this section. Here, the background to South Asian Digital Politics is introduced. The virtualisation of political contestation has pervaded South Asia's political landscape in a very rapid fashion, contributing to a fundamental change in its politics. Traditional broadcast and print journalism has been the main source of information in the past and the main medium which mediated the relationship between the state and its citizens, a relationship which has always been characterized as an unequal one (Godwin, 2023). Traditionally, the media, whether print or broadcast media, was the main source of information, and the main medium which was used to mediate the relationship between the state and its citizens, a relationship that has always been described as unequal. Yet, in the political landscape of today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, digital platforms (particularly X, formerly Twitter) have now irretrievably shifted from being auxiliary communication channels to being the main battlefronts for the creation, challenge and subversion of political legitimacy (Islam & Faisal, 2026). This paradigm shift has completely changed the modulations of public communications, shifting the power to speak from the classical institutional gatekeepers to algorithmic and participative digital spaces. Thus, the current digital environment is not simply

a mirror of physical political reality but rather a space of generation, negotiation and contestation of systemic power relations, ideological reproduction and democratic struggle, in real time. This virtualization of these spaces is of particular importance in terms of how each hashtag, viral post, and digital mobilization becomes a crucial point of engagement and negotiation within political processes to consolidate, and/or contest, hegemonic control, but also provides opportunities for marginalized and disenfranchised groups to assert themselves politically and challenge dominant state discourses on the global stage (Alam et al., 2025).

### 1.2 Problem Statement

The rise of algorithmic social media as political conversation more and more takes place in such spaces has given rise to a significant and complex challenge to democratic legitimacy. These digital architectures are intentionally used by state apparatus and ruling elites in order to create a hegemony and to silence opponents and critics by using advanced methods of digital authoritarianism. This encompasses the orchestration of bot networks for computational propaganda, internet blackouts and draconian cyber-legal frameworks in order to criminalize peaceful opposition. The very heart of this modern day crisis is the resulting "digital re- feudalization" of the public sphere. Internet in South Asia is massively colonized by state-manipulated disinformation and algorithmic manipulation rather than being a free, open, and rational-critical space for discussion as envisioned in classic democratic theory. This bending of space makes what is supposed to be potential spaces for democratic liberation into very restricted, very polarized, hyper-polarized spaces in which power is being consolidated by the elites. Thus, the core principles of democracy, consensus and accountability are seriously compromised by the state's technical and regulatory devices which systematically marginalise, discredit and even legally suppress dissenting voices to continue its political monopoly.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The study is motivated by three main research objectives:

1. To critically explore the specific linguistic tools and discursive practices employed by state and hegemonic actors in order to "produce" active consent and to assert a form of political control on the Internet.
2. To explore in detail the use of digital architectures by opposition coalitions, student movements and subaltern counter-publics in ways that creatively challenge and oppose repressive state apparatuses to build and maintain counter-hegemonic narratives.
3. To examine the wider implications of algorithmic spatiality, computational propaganda and limitative cyber-legal environment in the general integrity and sustainability of democratic legitimacy in the fast-changing digital public sphere of South Asia systematically.

### 1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the purposed goals and address the intricacies of political discourse in the digital age, three research questions guide this study:

1. How do the political elites and the state apparatuses of South Asia discursively construct, enforce and defend their political legitimacy on platforms like Twitter/X?
2. how is the process of undermining state-sponsored narratives and creating resilient digital counter-publics by civic movements, activists and marginalized groups?
3. what are the wider social and structural operations of digital infrastructures such as algorithmic recommendation systems, internet blackouts, automated bot deployments and draconian cyber laws, that limit or empower these high-stakes discursive contestations for democratic power?

### 1.5 Significance

This research is of great academic and practical importance: it explicitly fills a gap in comparative studies of the region on the topic of digital political communication. Employing a systematic qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study provides a detailed

analysis of the underlying mechanisms of ideologies in three of the most recent and high-stakes political crises in South Asia: Indian Farmers' Protests (2020-2024), Pakistani Regime Change and No-Confidence Motion (2022), and Bangladeshi Quota Reform and July Revolution (2024). The comparative perspective, not only because it sheds light on the local and context-specific aspects of digital authoritarianism and resistance, but also because it offers a much needed and theoretically grounded framework to understand the globalized pattern of online democratic backsliding and the ongoing and volatile nature of political power-brokering in algorithmic times.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony & Manufacture of Consent**

To fully theorise political legitimacy as discursively produced, this study plays creatively with Antonio Gramsci's (2020) seminal concept of cultural hegemony and its translation into the current digital territory. Gramsci's theory is that the ruling class does not hold on to power simply with the use of force and state coercion, but by gaining the "active and spontaneous consent of the governed" using cultural and ideological institutions in strategic ways. The digital age brings a high level of pertinence to this theoretical paradigm, since the battle for consent has clearly shifted to algorithmic platforms such as Twitter/X, where political elites, state apparatus and corporate media conglomerates are always trying to set the parameters for the online conversation by establishing what Gramsci called 'moral, intellectual, and cultural leadership'. Hegemonic actors try to establish their political predominance as a natural fact, as common sense, or a national need, by means of carefully crafted digital public relations campaigns, aligned influencers and the repetition of state sanctioned narratives. Thus, digital platforms should not be thought of as passive transmitters of information but are in fact ideological spaces to be fought over, in which the creation of active consent is always a subject of negotiation. An hegemony is when the State's version of events is able to "trendjack" social media, meaning its narrative manages to trend the algorithms instead of imposing repression by itself, and effectively eradicates the possibility of alternative narratives from the social media landscape.

### **2.2 Habermas' Public Sphere and Fraser's Subaltern**

The idea of spatial conceptualisation of these discursive struggles is linked to the seminal theory of the 'public sphere' by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Habermas imagined the public sphere as a place of open, free, democratic and equal access by all private individuals to come together to engage in rational-critical discussion free of state coercion and economic exploitation. This study, however, takes a very critical view on the Habermasian ideal and contends that the internet in the current times of South Asia is experiencing a serious "digital re-feudalization. These online spaces are not conducive to open and equitable discussion and debate, but are rather subject to algorithmic manipulation, structural inequalities and government-sponsored disinformation that essentially undermine the democratic process. This study incorporates Nancy Fraser's (2024) important notion of "subaltern counter-publics" to correct the theoretical shortcoming of a singular and unified public sphere that is predisposed towards dominant and bourgeois class. In his effort to prove this point, Fraser convincingly posits that those who are marginalised and subordinated need to create their own parallel, pluralistic discursive spaces in which to construct oppositional readings of identity, interest and need. This is particularly an issue for the South Asian region, which is politically turbulent, where these subaltern counter-public is forcefully expressed by the disenfranchised groups, e.g., the agrarian unions in the Indian Farmers' Protests or the Generation Z student activists in the Bangladesh July Revolution. It is these groups that use the participatory possibilities of digital architectures to create and share counter-hegemonic discourses, to "go around the back" of the traditional, state compliant media gatekeepers. In carving out these separate, highly mobile digital counter-publics, they contest the state's monopoly over "truth" and "legitimacy",

showing the digital realm to be a multi-layered, fractured space of overlapping and competing publics.

### **2.3 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework**

This research bases its methodological approach in the intersection of the theoretical positions of Gramscian hegemony and Fraser's counter-publics by solidly positioning itself within the methodological proposal of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) presented by Norman Fairclough (2023) in his Three-Dimensional Framework. This study would be best suited using Fairclough's model as it is apt for discussing both the micro-level of language and the macro-level of sociological theories of power, which makes it best to dissect digital political texts. The framework calls for a thorough discourse study in three layers. The first dimension is the one of the digital content itself, Text, where a granular linguistic analysis of the content is performed. This involves examining viral tweet templates in terms of their syntactic, lexical, vocabulary, metaphoric, passive/active voice, transitivity and nominalization constructions and how they present or veil political reality and political bias. The second, Discursive Practice, can be seen as providing a focus on the processes of production, consumption and distribution of these texts. This means understanding the ways in which the narrative is made to be computationally amplified, the mechanisms of hashtag coordination, the speed of content sharing, and the use of social bot networks and verified influencers to create artificially virality, all on the platform of Twitter/X. The third and final dimension is called Social Practice, whereby the texts to be analyzed and the distribution of these discourses are viewed in the larger, encompassing structures of ideology and institution. This macro-level analysis explores whether, and how, the digital discourses reflect, reinforce, and/or contest the physical and structural realities, including state-sanctioned violence, draconian cyber-legal frameworks, targeted internet censorship and the overarching political economy of digital authoritarianism in South Asia. Fairclough's framework brings together these three dimensions to allow a holistic, highly critical perspective on the functioning of language on social media as a system of power, dominance and ideologies.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Social Media as South Asian Political Public Sphere.**

The understanding of social media in the field of political communication has undergone a radical transformation and its use in the highly volatile and polarized environment of South Asia has been extremely dynamic (Fraser, 2024). Digital platforms have been discussed in recent literature, not only as a communication platform, but as a highly controversial, complex political public sphere. In this critical perspective, Emilio Gerbaudo (2017) conceptualizes the social media platforms as crucial "counter-spaces. In his opinion, such platforms allow activists to build and maintain long-lasting and open archives of dissent that could directly challenge and subvert dominant narratives and state-sponsored fabrications, and allow for the spread of political protests beyond their physical life cycle of street assemblies into time and space. Building on that, the literature emphasizes the important notion of "trans-spatiality" which is a "dialectical relation between virtual engagement and physical protest environments that manifests itself in a highly interwoven and mutually dependent way" (Dietz 2009: 29). Following the theories of Bennett and Segerberg (2023), in these days political movements are more and more based on the "logic of connective action. In this paradigm, personalised sharing of digital content – through decentralised social networks – is a worthy substitute for the rigid, traditional institutional organisation. It is a decentralised system in which collective political identities can be built and mass mobilisation can take place very quickly and in real time. This trans-spatial connective action has been a key feature in translating digital outrage to powerful physical mass movements and the internet has proven to be a powerful enabler of democratic accountability and overhauling of society in South Asian context.

### 3.2 Discursive Strategies of Legitimacy and Polarization

One important area of political communication scholarship emphasizes very explicitly the discursive practices used to create legitimacy and to purposefully polarize the public sphere. At the heart of this theoretical journey is the highly influential model of basic cognitive and linguistic mechanisms of group polarization called the "Ideological Square" (van Dijk 2006). Political rhetoric is often based on a "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy in which the goodness of "Us" is foregrounded and the badness of "Them" is accentuated and exaggerated, according to van Dijk. If this model is overlaid with the rhetoric of the populist popular discourse in South Asian digital public sphere, it is possible to clearly see how political elites and ruling parties create a very exclusionary and hyper-nationalist identity (Fraser, 2024). This binary attitude has been shown in the literature to be very common among the state entities for discrediting any kind of democratic opposition. They use hyper-nationalistic othering, systematically labeling activists as "anti-national," "foreign agent," or "terrorist," and de-legitimizing activists and students, as well as marginalized communities, of their legitimate political voice. At the same time, the hegemonic actors invoke paternalistic exclusions, and speak in a language that poses the pretence of defending the "real", "hardworking" citizens against this invented inner danger. These discursive strategies de facto weaponize patriotism by casting the State as the only preserver of the national sovereignty and modernity from the evil outside and inside forces (Godwin, 2023). This manufactured polarization not only ignores legitimate grievances, but also creates a very toxic digital space where discussion of any kind in a rational and critical fashion is systematically replaced by personal and ideological attacks with a view to creating a space for political dispute that is always seen through the narrow prism of national security and not democratic accountability.

### 3.3 Digital Authoritarianism and Algorithmic Manipulation

While social media can be a democratising tool, a growing and worrying literature critically analyses the structural limits of modern digital authoritarianism of the Global South. The digital public sphere is continually undermined by ubiquitous algorithmic tampering and by coercive measures of a highly intrusive nature, scholars argue (Fairclough, 2023). One key theme is the use of computational propaganda – and how it's being used in an insidious way, often via highly coordinated social bot networks. Such malicious automated architectures are used by state IT cells to artificially multiply hegemonic narratives, function recommendation algorithms and launch targeted smear campaigns against dissidents to generate extremely skewed impressions of public opinion. Moreover, literature shows that the deployment of arbitrary and targeted internet shutdowns has been used to seriously hamper the organisational abilities of counter-publics at key moments of protest, with physical digital infrastructure being a particularly aggressive means of weaponisation. This technological repression is compounded by the enforcement of repressive cyber-legal regimes, like Bangladesh's extremely repressive Digital Security Act (DSA) and Section 69A of India's Information Technology Act. Such institutional procedures routinely stifle legitimate online dissent, impose arbitrary account closures and help to create a culture of self-censorship among politicians, journalists and citizens (Mirza et al., 2023). The literature thus strongly implies that in essence the digital ecosystem in South Asia is highly asymmetric and that the state's power is actively undermining the emancipatory and transformative power of digital liberatory technologies.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Qualitative Research Design

This study adopts the basic methodological approach of strongly qualitative research which is methodologically supported by the solid tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). There is a deliberate choice of the strictly qualitative approach, and it is well theoretically justified – the aim of this research is not to statistically quantify the amount of social media traffic, but to delve deeper into the nuances of the ideology and ideological

mechanisms in digital political texts. CDA is able to shed light on the opaque intersections of language, society, and systemic dominance in unique ways. This qualitative approach captures the social construction of Twitter/X posts, which are far from neutral, and gives sufficient analytical depth to see the dynamics of power relations and the intricate workings of ideological reproduction used by hegemonic actors. Moreover, the qualitative CDA approach enables a nuanced, contextually-aware analysis of the ways in which different rhetorical devices, grammatical structures and lexical decisions are deployed strategically to produce political legitimacy or, on the other hand, to create powerful, subversive counter-narratives in the very complex and volatile socio-political landscape of South Asia.

**Table 1.** *Theoretical and Methodological Matrix for Digital Critical Discourse Analysis*

<b>Analytical Dimension</b>	<b>Associated Theorist</b>	<b>Core Concept Operationalized</b>	<b>Application to South Asian Digital Texts</b>
<b>Micro-Level (Text)</b>	Norman Fairclough	Linguistic Devices & Syntactic Structures	Analyzing nominalization, passive voice, paternalistic neologisms (e.g., Andolanjeevi), and visceral/somatic imagery in viral tweets.
<b>Meso-Level (Discursive Practice)</b>	Teun A. van Dijk / Emiliano Gerbaudo	Ideological Square & Trans-Spatiality	Mapping "Us vs. Them" hashtag polarization; analyzing algorithmic distribution, bot deployment, and transnational information circulation.
<b>Macro-Level (Social Practice)</b>	Antonio Gramsci / Jürgen Habermas / Nancy Fraser	Cultural Hegemony & Subaltern Counter-Publics	Contextualizing digital discourse against structural digital authoritarianism (internet blackouts, cyber laws) and the state's crisis of democratic legitimacy.

#### 4.2 Data Collection and Sampling Criteria

This study uses data collection strategies that are highly purposeful and rigorously thought-out to ensure the most concentrated and illustrative examples of discursive contestation in the South Asian digital public sphere are captured. The sample specifically refers to three recent crises of high stakes of legitimacy of the state – Indian Farmers' Protests from the early agrarian reform resistance (2020-2021) to the latest statutory demands (2024), Pakistani Regime Change and No-Confidence Motion of April 2022, and revolutionary Bangladesh Quota Reform and the July Uprising of 2024. Considering the pivotal role of social media platforms, specifically Twitter/X, as a key channel in elite politics communication and for quick dissemination of narratives, textual data was systematically collected for each unique case study. The text selection criteria were particular during the selection of widely circulated texts such as simulated viral tweeting templates and highly resonant posts that came from verified and highly influential handles. This includes the digital trace of both state and hegemonic actors (such as @narendramodi, @CMShehbaz, state IT cells etc.) and oppositional rhetoric of civic counter publics (such as Samyukt Kisan Morcha, @ImranKhanPTI, Gen-Z student coordinators etc.). Moreover, the data collection was conducted in a way that the use of dominant and state backed hashtags (such as #IndiaAgainstPropaganda, #DemocracyRestored) were juxtaposed with revolutionary counter-hashtags (such as #ImportedHukoomatNaManzoor, #StepDownHasina) to capture the absolute peak of the discursive polarization and ideological struggle.

### 4.3 Analytical Procedure

In order to analyze the collected qualitative data in this study, an analytical procedure was systematically organized to use the three-dimensional analytical framework of the well-known scholar, Norman Fairclough, to conduct a multi-layered and comprehensive critique. The analysis is carried out in a three-phase process, which are interrelated. At the micro level, the selected viral tweet templates and statements are detailed textually and linguistically analysed initially. This stage is focused on the particular syntactic, semantic and grammatical structures, including the use of passive voice to elide state violence, the use of highly affective language to categorize and delegitimize political actors via paternalistic metaphors. The analysis then moves to the meso-level of discursive practice, where processes to create and circulate these texts and their speedy algorithmic circulation are evaluated. This includes a detailed analysis of the digital media ecology, including the classification of different types of bots (informational and malicious), and the use of AI-powered botnets that are capable of generating a large number of disinformation messages and artificially boosting the relevance of certain hashtags to create a hegemonic narrative. Lastly, the study places these digital discourses in an overall, structural power struggle that the region is defined by, at the macro-level of social practice. This is the final and important step of how the linguistic results connect with the material and socio-economic realities, analysing explicitly how the textual narratives either reinforce or engage in trying to break the stark limitations of digital authoritarianism, such as state-sponsored internet shutdowns and highly repressive and draconian cyber-legal frameworks.

### 5. Analysis & Discussion

In this section, the authors apply the three dimensions of the framework, as outlined by Norman Fairclough, in a systematic way to critically analyse the strategies adopted in the digital discourse in three major crises in South Asia. The micro level analysis of Text (linguistic features and semantic framing), the meso level analysis of Discursive Practice (algorithmic distribution, hashtag coordination and production mechanisms) and the macro level analysis of Social Practice (the wider structural power dynamics, the ideological reproduction and cyber-legal censorship) are seamlessly integrated for each of the case studies.

#### 5.1 Case Study 1: The Indian Farmers' Protests – Hegemony vs. Agrarian Populism

**Textual Analysis:** On the linguistic micro-level, there was a very strategic lexical selection of the Indian state and its allied hegemonic agents for creating a "protest paradigm" to delegitimise the agrarian protest systematically. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) resorted to a lot of passive constructions and abstract nominalizations – the use of words like a "coordinated lobby" that is "attempting" to "derail" historic agriculture reforms – to create an unseen, dirty outside force and to distract from the protesters' specific grievances (NORONHA, 2024). The Prime Minister Narendra Modi cleverly used highly paternalistic and exclusionary new words like *Andolanjeevi* (professional protesters) and *parajeevi* (parasites). This hyper-nationalistic process of othering, that often pejoratively labelled the mostly Sikh farmers from Punjab as "Khalistani" separatists, would aim to split public sympathy by discursively dividing "legitimate" hardworking farmers from those who were supposedly in bad faith. On the other hand, the *Samyukt Kisan Morcha* (SKM) and the subaltern counter-public produced a strong counter-hegemonic narrative which was very somatic, with maternal metaphors (Saidulu, 2024). The counter-public thus moved the discussion beyond the vague, abstract civic nationalism, to the sacred, indigenous right to land, and the existential struggle for rural survival, commanding enormous moral force through the use of phrases like "the soil of Punjab is our mother", and the use of terms like "iron nails" and "freezing cold" (Nayak, 2025).

**Table 2.** *Discursive Mapping of Hegemony vs. Counter-Hegemony in the Indian Farmers' Protests*

Discursive Dimension	Hegemonic/State Narrative	Counter-Hegemonic/Opposition Narrative
<b>Dominant Hashtags</b>	#IndiaAgainstPropaganda, #IndiaTogether, #FarmLawsForward	#FarmersProtest, #NoFarmersNoFood, #GodiMedia
<b>Core Slogans</b>	"One Nation, One Market", "Modernizing Indian Agriculture"	"Kisan Ekta Zindabad", "Corporate Mukht Kheti" (Corporate-Free Farming)
<b>Discursive Frame</b>	Technocratic Modernization: Deregulation framed as a scientific necessity; dissent framed as engineered "international conspiracy".	Agrarian Populism & Human Rights: The state framed as corporate-friendly; the struggle framed as an existential battle to protect rural survival.
<b>Linguistic Strategy</b>	Paternalistic exclusion (Andolanjeevi, parajeevi); Hyper-nationalistic othering (branding protesters as "Khalistanis").	Collective moral appeals to regional nativity ("soil is our mother"); Somatic imagery ("iron nails", "freezing cold").
<b>Strategic Actors</b>	State apparatus (@narendramodi, @MEAIndia), Aligned Bollywood/Cricket Celebrities.	Civic networks (SKM, Rakesh Tikait), Alternative Media, Transnational Observers (Rihanna).

**Discursive Practice:** It is important to note the extent of the asymmetries in the digital ecology of production and consumption of these texts. The state sought to become hegemonic digitally, with very orchestrated and viral productions. The campaign was a well-timed one, that hit the screens immediately after an official pronouncement by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on February 3, 2021, against "foreign interference". Bollywood stars and leading cricketers had to act in unison and use the same hashtags to highlight elite cultural capital: Bollywood actors and cricketers were dropping tweets with the same message at exactly 20 minutes to each other using hashtags that were being state-sanctioned, such as #IndiaAgainstPropaganda and #IndiaTogether. But this domestic information blockade was broken through by transnational interventions in a violent manner. International celebrities like Rihanna, who asked "why aren't we talking about this?" on Twitter, and Greta Thunberg were able to circumvent local media filter operations. This internationalization gave the agrarian counter-public the digital impetus to keep organic hashtags such as #FarmersProtest and #NoFarmersNoFood going, and to organize decentralized, non-hierarchical and grassroots solidarity, essentially countering the state's well-knit public relations machine.

**Social Practice:** On a macro-sociological level, such discursive conflicts are an expression of an underlying and fundamental structural conflict concerning neoliberal restructuring and corporate land dispossession. The state presented agricultural deregulation as an unavoidable technocratic and scientific imperative ("One Nation, One Market"), thus flattering them with the illusion that they were pursuing a scientific and technological agenda in order to quell the profound structural fears of price volatility that haunt the Indian agricultural system, where 40% of the population is engaged. In order to try to enforce this extremely unpopular neoliberal hegemony the state resorted to obvious digital authoritarianism. The government blocked the Twitter account of many digital leaders, agricultural unions and even critical alternative media outlets such as journalists Sandeep Singh (@PunYaab) and Mandeep Punia under the Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, in an arbitrary manner. By using structural means to restrict public access to and

physically destroy the infrastructure of the digital public sphere, this law shows how legal means can be used when it is not possible to obtain 'naturally' ideological consent.

### 5.2 Case Study 2: Pakistan Regime Change 2022 – The Ideological Square in Action

**Textual Analysis:** The discursive struggle over the ousting of the incumbent PM, Imran Khan, in April 2022 is an excellent example of Teun A. van Dijk's "Ideological Square" that has the absolute moral dichotomy of positive self-representation and extremely negative other-representation. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition and establishment actors supporting it established their legitimacy in a purely legal-rational language. Their semantic focus was on the procedural aspects of "rule of law," "constitutional supremacy," and "therapy" to "cure" the nation of an "incompetent demagogue" whose "personal ego" had purportedly ruined the economy (Ali, Akram, et al., 2025). On the other hand, Imran Khan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) used a very aggressive anti-imperialist rhetoric that was populist in nature. They completely changed the discourse from parliamentary procedures into a battle between Haq (truth/righteousness) and Batil (falsehood/evil) on civilizational and theological lines. The PTI created a public persona of defiance and collective by constantly using the terms "imported puppets", "corrupt elite" and "traitors" for the PDM government that was put in power through an alleged foreign-funded conspiracy. At the time, the words of "240 million citizens... will never bow down" propelled a local political shift to a very existential danger for the sovereign survival of the country (Ali, Khan, et al., 2025).

**Table 3.** *The Ideological Square in Pakistan's 2022 Regime Change Crisis*

<b>Discursive Dimension</b>	<b>Hegemonic/Establishment (PDM) Narrative</b>	<b>Counter-Hegemonic (PTI) Narrative</b>
<b>Dominant Hashtags</b>	#NoConfidenceMotion, #DemocracyRestored, #ConstitutionalSupremacy	#ImportedHukoomatNaManzoor, #AbsolutelyNot, #ForeignConspiracy
<b>Core Slogans</b>	"Vote Ko Izzat Do" (Respect the Vote), "Constitutional Triumph"	"Slavery No More", "Freedom is Not Free", "Battle of Haq vs. Batil"
<b>Discursive Frame</b>	Constitutionalism & Economic Recovery: The NCM is framed as a therapeutic, legal process to save the nation from a "demagogue".	Anti-Imperialist Populism: The ouster is framed as a foreign-funded coup designed to install a submissive, corrupt Western elite.
<b>Linguistic Strategy</b>	Vocabulary of legal-rational authority ("institutions," "rule of law"); Depicting opponents as "violators of decorum".	Absolute moral binary of positive "Us" (Sovereign 240 million) vs. negative "Them" (Imported puppets, traitors).
<b>Digital Infrastructure</b>	Institutional control, internet disruptions, ISPR communications.	Digital Media Wing (DMW), immense Twitter Spaces, and (later) algorithmic distortion via generative botnets.

**Discursive Practice:** Meso-level dynamics in this crisis highlight unprecedented use of technologically advanced and more organized digital wings to circumvent traditional censorship. After his dismissal, PTI Digital Media Wing (DMW) organization – that had already been involved in the strategic public relations campaigns in the various states of the country in collaboration with relevant military public relations offices – quickly shifted gears to help maintain an outsized digital resistance against the former hegemon. During late April 2022, PTI managed to generate more than 106 million tweets on Twitter using the hashtag #ImportedHukoomatNaManzoor ("Imported Government Unacceptable") and through use of other digital platforms such as massive Twitter Spaces and independent podcasts, they were

able to bypass state-controlled mainstream media. But there was also a great deal of epistemic decay as a result of this hyper-mobilization. The domestic story narrative permeated to the international information systems, creating system vulnerabilities. For example, X had to proactively remove many Pakistani-run accounts from its Creator Revenue Sharing program in March 2026 which used malicious bots to generate deepfake images of the situation in the Middle East to monetise them.

**Social Practice:** In terms of structure it was a digital warfare that shook the power dynamics between civilian and military in Pakistan. For the first time in the "traditional hegemonic bloc" of the nation, the counter-public now directed their nationalist rhetoric against the army leadership itself and publicly labeled the Chief of Army Staff as a "traitor". More importantly, the large-scale conflicts which took place online happened at a time of extreme vulnerability of material infrastructures. Recurring disruptions on the internet and problems with submarine cables severely affected the Habermasian ideal of the accessibility of the public sphere. The state of Pakistan used infrastructural degradation as a passive-aggressive instrument of digital authoritarianism as it threatened to undermine the material existence of the online counter-public, with the nation experiencing an estimated \$1.62 billion in economic losses due to Internet outages in 2024 and ranking 7th in the Internet Resilience Index for South Asia.

### 5.3 Case Study 3: Bangladesh July Revolution 2024 – Subverting Nationalist Memory

**Textual Analysis:** The Bangladeshi Quota Reform movement that quickly turned into the historic July Revolution of 2024 offers a rich field of textual analysis on how historical memory was subverted via the state's weaponization of the movement. In the past the strategy of the incumbent Awami League government had been to use the 1971 "Liberation War" story as their discursive tool to establish unconditional political legitimacy (Alam et al., 2025). Historical determinism and extreme nominalization were used by the state to label peaceful anti-quota students as "anti-liberation forces" and "terrorists" as well as the most offensive term 'Razakar' (a very dirty word for local collaborators with the Pakistani military). This language was meant to designate "economic grievance" holders as "existential enemies of the state (Islam & Faisal, 2026). But it was when the Gen Z activists pulled off the subversive reclamation of the discourse that a critical turning point took place. After derogatory comments by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the press on July 14, the students spontaneously mobilised with a heavily rhythmical and defiant slogan, "Tumi ke? Ami ke? Razakar, Razakar! Ke bolechhe? Shoirachar, shoirachar!"\* ("Who are you? Who am I? Razakar, Razakar! Who said so? Autocrat, the autocrat! This is because the students cynically adopted the slur, and instantly turned the label of 'Shoirachar' (despot) back on the state and its regime (Rashed & Rashed, 2024).

**Table 4.** *Discursive Shifts and Connective Action in the Bangladesh July Revolution (2024)*

Stage & Date Range	Primary Stage Focus	Structural Developments & State Response	Discursive Hashtags Used
Stage 1 (July 1–14)	Peaceful Quota Law Reform	Students initiate campus demonstrations following High Court reinstating the quota.	#QuotaMovement, #ReformQuota, #MeritOverQuota
Stage 2 (July 15–20)	"Razakar" Subversion & Suppression	PM's "Razakar" remarks spark anger. Chhatra League (BCL) deploys violence. Students subvert the slur.	#SaveBangladeshiStudents, #StudentsUnderAttack

<b>Stage 3 (July 21–31)</b>	Deadly Crackdown & Internet Blackout	Extreme state brutality (shooting of unarmed Abu Sayed). Nationwide internet blackout on July 18.	#JulyMassacre, #JusticeForAbuSayed
<b>Stage 4 (Aug 1– 4)</b>	Nationwide One-Point Demand	Broad trans-spatial coalition forms around a single demand for Hasina's resignation.	#StepDownHasina, #onepointdemand, #DictatorHasina
<b>Stage 5 (Aug 5– 10)</b>	Political Exile & Interim Gov.	Hasina resigns and flees. Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus forms the interim cabinet.	#NewBangladesh, #Liberation2024

**Discursive Practice:** The July Revolution demonstrated an amazing power of decentralized action and connectivity on the level of discursive practice. SA discrimination coalition with its coordinators such as Nahid Islam, Sarjis Alam, etc., effectively made use of various platforms such as Facebook and Twitter/X to organize in the decentralized networks of the universities. The organic mobilization was in contrast with the institutional IT cell of the Awami League and its student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) that resorted to violence. During this process, the students changed from moderate reformism (Stage 1) to deadly crackdown (Stage 3) and used powerful emotional and martyrdom slogans to stay motivated. The spread of the footage of the unarmed student, Abu Sayed, stretching his arms out to the police officers with their guns before him was an indubitably defiant picture. This digital discourse contrasted the material strength of the state, the "bullets," with the symbolic moral strength of the students, the "red cards," and changed the trending hashtags from #QuotaMovement to revolutionary ones such as #StepDownHasina and #JulyMassacre.

**Social Practice:** The implications and meanings of this discourse at the macro level demonstrate the absolute limits of dynastic legitimation in the context of structural digital repression. The one thing the state could do to control the narrative, was to use the mother of all digital authoritarianism: a complete nationwide internet shutdown that was initiated on July 18, as a form of collective punishment, to hide the extrajudicial killings of more than one thousand civilians. But instead of blacking out the subaltern counter-public this physical blackout of infrastructure invigorated the trans-spatial movement. The digital "counter-spaces" had already come up with a unified "one-point demand" and in essence had made a localized campus protest a broad revolutionary coalition. The success of this movement which led to Hasina's resignation, flight into exile and replacement of the government by an interim government headed by a Nobel Laureate, shows that when state coercion destroys the digital public sphere, it paradoxically throws its mechanisms of manufacturing consent into disarray, rendering its hegemony terminally unsustainable.

#### 5.4 Cross-Case Synthesis: The Contingent Nature of Digital Hegemony

By combining these empirical findings from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, we can shed some light on a key paradox that underlies the digital politics of South Asia: that although the 'digital re-feudalisation' of the public sphere in this region is a very common structural reality, hegemony in the Gramscian sense on social media is also always an unstable and very fragile affair. State apparatuses always try to manipulate the discursive field by using cyborg armies, ruthless cyber-laws and intentional internet shutdowns. However, these downward processes of provision of consent are often not sufficient to ensure lasting consent. In all examined cases, pluralistic "subaltern counter-publics" are also empowered by the digital architectures. These very dynamic civic networks are able to quickly destabilize established

state narratives by creatively taking on nationalist symbols, countering derogatory labels and avoiding traditional, state-sanctioned gatekeepers in the media. In short, South Asian digital hegemony is never a "finished" or static condition, but a very uncertain and precarious resource to be constantly and creatively renegotiated in the face of ongoing and innovative counter-protester by organized digital citizens.

**Table 5.** *Structural Dynamics of Digital Authoritarianism in South Asia*

Country	Draconian Cyber-Legal Frameworks	Infrastructural & Algorithmic Interventions	Public Sphere Consequences
<b>India</b>	Information Technology Act, 2000 (Section 69A)	Coordinated state IT cell campaigns; arbitrary account withholding requests to Twitter/X.	Systematic suppression of alternative reporting; normalization of a state-sanctioned "protest paradigm".
<b>Pakistan</b>	PECA (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act)	Severe internet and submarine cable disruptions (AAE-1 faults); artificial amplification via generative bots.	Shrinking digital civic space; massive economic losses (\$1.62 billion in 2024); epistemic decay via synthesized deepfakes.
<b>Bangladesh</b>	Digital Security Act (DSA) / Cyber Security Ordinance	Complete, nationwide infrastructural blackouts; state-sponsored historical disinformation.	Criminalization of political satire and online criticism; eventual systemic collapse of digital hegemonic control.

## 6. Conclusion & Recommendations

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

This thorough Critical Discourse Analysis in essence reveals that in today's South Asian world, political legitimacy is no longer a single resource that can be gained solely from olden public institutions like the press, tv or judiciary system. Rather, democratic power must be maintained in an aggressive, ongoing manner with algorithms. Results strongly suggest that state actors throughout the region intentionally and systematically use a mix of historical determinism, exclusionary legal-rational turn of phrase and synchronized computational propaganda to produce active ideological consent. So in India the state had to rely on paternalistic othering and celebrity cultural capital as a means of protecting neoliberal deregulation, in Pakistan the ruling coalition resorted to procedural legalism amidst profound infrastructural insecurity, while in Bangladesh the regime was able to mobilise the liberation history as a means of deflecting economic grievances. But this digital dominance, wielded by the state, is highly fragile. The study clearly reveals the agency of subaltern counter-publics, from agrarian unions and populist networks to the actions of the student activists of Generation Z. Through these decentralized coalitions they manage to subvert the digital authoritarianism, recover highly derogatory state labels, access powerful somatic and emotional tropes and create transnational digital solidarity to circumvent local gatekeepers. They thus effectively challenge the moral monopoly of the state, and demonstrate the remarkable power of civic resistance in structurally colonized digital spaces.

### 6.2 Implications for Democratic Legitimacy

The deep polarization revealed in this research directly relates to the key problem statement of this study: the current digital landscape is a dual-use and polarized environment. Algorithmic social media spaces are invaluable tools for accountability in democracy on the

one hand. They represent Nancy Fraser's pluralistic "subaltern counter-publics" which gives historically marginalised communities the necessary architectural tools to organise, articulate alternative visions and to challenge autocratic overreach. The background of Habermasian "digital re-feudalization", however, is also inescapable. Digital platforms are at the same time used as unprecedented tools of State coercion. Structural architectures can be used to shape the public sphere in an egalitarian way and, when misused by political elites, for example via draconian cyber policies, arbitrary internet shutdowns and state sponsored disinformation, they can be strongly skewed. The overall impact on the legitimacy of the democratic process in South Asia is thus rather precarious. The basic democratic ability to reach a rational-critical consensus is likely to be completely outshone by a permanent, algorithmically driven ideological warfare, and by an epistemically decaying state.

### 6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Though it is strictly qualitative, this CRA gives an important macroscopic knowledge of language and ideological power struggles, future research is required to extend the methodological scope of CRA to fully represent the changes in the digital ecosystem. First, a need for a wide range of ethnographic studies that can help complement textual CDA exists. Insights into how trans-spatiality works on the ground comes from studying digital activists' lived, offline realities, the psychological impacts, and the organization's local practices, all of which operate under extreme state surveillance. Secondly, an urgent call to action is needed from the academic field to increasingly embrace the role of GAI in political communication. The initial signs of AI-generated deep fake and automated botnets leveraging on local conflicts (as seen in the Pakistani case) point towards a very dangerous trajectory for the Global South. Future studies must systematically document how generative AI contributes to the acceleration of epistemic decay, its basic and multiple impacts on verification of truth claims and how it enables authoritarian governments and bad actors to easily and quickly fabricate highly realistic disinformation on a scale never before seen.

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