The Lighthouse Journal of Literature & Linguistics, Vol. 05, Issue 01, Summer 2026, pp. 47-71

Claiming Political Legitimacy in Pakistan's Digital Arena: PTI vs. PDM Self-Legitimation Strategies on Twitter/X across the 9 May 2023 Critical Juncture

Humera Rahman[1], **Samina Ashfaq**[2], **Mujib Rahman**[3]

ABSTRACT

During political crises, actors must represent their actions as rightful, necessary, and justified. From April 2022 (VONC) through the 9 May 2023 rupture to February 2024 (General Elections), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) fought a Twitter/X hashtag battle for self-legitimation. However, no significant research has emerged during the past 3 years that exclusively focussed on this digital tug of war through hashtags. Using van Leeuwen's legitimation framework, we categorised 103 trending Urdu/English hashtags as authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis through consensus coding approach. We discovered that, prior to 9 May, PTI opted for offensive legitimation through populist discourse, whereas PDM employed defensive legitimation through institutional authority and economic rationale. Post-9 May, PDM enhanced its dependence on institutional authorisation. PTI, on the other hand, deployed victimhood narrative and achieved greater visibility because of its reliance on moral appeals (Moral Evaluation and Mythopoesis). This paper is an attempt to contribute to research on digital political discourse by mapping how legitimation strategies adapt across crisis junctures in a post-truth context.

Keywords*: legitimation, political discourse, Twitter, Pakistan, hashtags, van Leeuwen, post-truth, populism, critical discourse studies*

INTRODUCTION

Political upheavals create extraordinary opportunities for actors to construct, negotiate, and contest legitimacy for their deeds and actions. During volatile periods, the struggle for power is not merely institutional but also discursive: political groups fight to impose their interpretation of events as the rightful, moral, or necessary one (Habermas, 1984; van Leeuwen, 2007). In Pakistan, from the Vote of No Confidence (VONC) which resulted in Imran Khan's ouster in April 2022 to the violent upheaval of 9 May 2023 and thenceforth, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) engaged in a prolonged legitimation battle.

This was a watershed moment, which not only transformed the physical political landscape but also intensified the struggle over narrative construction in the digital sphere. However, research on Pakistani digital political discourse has only examined political communication, framing, and ideological contestation on Twitter/X (Ghauri et al., 2023; Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023; Rafi,

[1]Professor of English/Linguistics, GFCW, Peshawar (PhD Scholar). Corresponding Author's Email: humeramujib@gmail.com
[2]Professor of English, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Hayatabad, Peshawar
[3]Professor of English, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Hayatabad, Peshawar

Manuscript Submitted: March 17, 2026
Manuscript Accepted: March 30, 2026

2025; Rafi & Manzoor, 2026) with limited or no attention to self-legitimation strategies related to 9 May 2023 events. This paper addresses this gap by analysing how the two political parties employed self-legitimation strategies to claim legitimacy across the 9 May 2023 critical juncture. Both groups employed Twitter/X hashtags in Urdu and English to condense complex political arguments into emotionally charged, easily circulated frames (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018; Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

This battle for legitimacy was fought not on verifiable facts, but emotion, empathy, and identity, which are the hallmarks of post-truth politics (Keyes, 2004; Harsin, 2015; Hameleers, 2020, 2022). Kalpokas (2019, p. 123) definers post-truth as "the blurring of distinction between truth and falsehood." Post-truth is thus "a condition in which truth is no longer respected, facts are no longer acknowledged, and people increasingly judge others according to emotion and group affiliation" (Zoglauer, 2023, p. 1). However, we use the term 'post-truth' not as the absence of truth, but as a condition which favours affective and identity-based claims to dominate epistemic authority. Previous studies demonstrate that political crises intensify legitimation and delegitimation strategies (Wodak, 2015; Moffitt, 2016), especially in polarized contexts where state institutions, populist parties, and citizen publics compete for narrative dominance (Tucker et al., 2021; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009). Bennet and Segerber (2021) and Chadwick (2017) maintain that digital platforms favour emotional messaging, conflictual framing, and rapid circulation which make them ideal sites for such contests.

Twitter offers an empirical window into this discursive battle. #ImportedHakoomat, #May9BlackDay, and #PakistanUnderSiege were the hashtags abundantly used as mobilising tools, meaning-making devices, and discursive arsenal to construct legitimacy for 'US' while delegitimating 'THEM'. The main research question that anchored this study was: What distinct self-legitimation strategies did PTI and PDM use to establish authority and discursively construct power dynamics, and whose strategies look dominant in terms of achieving aims and swaying public opinion?

We worked to achieve two objectives. (1) to identify and analyse the self-legitimation strategies used by PTI and PDM actors across the pre- and post-9 May period; and (2) to conceptualise how political legitimation in Pakistan is increasingly reflecting post-truth communicative tendencies, namely, emotional response and identity-based reasoning that often outweigh factual accuracy (Hameleers, 2022; Harsin, 2015; Waisbord, 2018). Using van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) four modes of legitimation, viz, authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis — which political actors use at large to make their actions appear justified — we analyse a corpus of 103 trending hashtags, using both qualitative coding and quantitative visibility trends.

We extend van Leeuwen's legitimation framework to the analysis of hashtag discourse, which is a highly condensed yet influential form of digital communication. This paper, thus, aims to contribute to digital discourse studies, especial political. In the contemporary hybrid media contexts, legitimation operates across distinct yet interacting spheres as digitally mediated publics and institutional power structures (Vaara, Aranda & Etchanchu, 2024). Focusing on the Pakistani context, we attempt to illustrate how these spheres of contestation may diverge in terms of emotionally charged discourses achieving greater visibility online and institutionally grounded claims shaping political outcomes.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Legitimation

In Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), legitimation is positioned as a discursive mechanism through which power relations are constructed, contested, and naturalised in society. Of the eighteen legitimation studies from 2007 to 2019, the most cited are by van Leeuwen, van Dijk, Wodak, Fairclough, Rojo, and Chilton, all highest-ranking CDS scholars (Yu & Zheng, 2023). According to Fairclough (2015), 'discourse is both socially shaped and socially constitutive.' It is a form of social practice through which ideology becomes embedded in everyday communication. From this perspective, hashtags are not just neutral labels; they are condensed discursive stratagems that stabilise certain interpretations of political meaning and reality while marginalising others. Van Dijk (2006) contends that this happens because discourse mediates between cognition and society by shaping shared mental models and ideological polarisation. Finally, Ruth Wodak (2015) maintains that the historical and intertextual embedding of such ideologically polarised discourses in collective memory and nationalist narratives lead to a sustained division between political groups. Integration of van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) framework within CDA tradition should enable one to identify strategies through which competing actors seek to legitimate their claims and construct hegemonic narratives in digital spheres.

Theo van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) has identified four key categories for the analysis of discursive legitimation:

i. *Authorisation (AU)*: Using discourses that refer to well-identified and accepted authorities as legitimate: personal (leaders, experts), impersonal (laws, institutions), or traditional (customs, national identity).

ii. *Moral Evaluation (ME):* Using discourses of value that highlight patriotism, nationalism, religion, or emotional appeals, involving abstraction, based on binaries (e.g., "righteous," "corrupt") to align actions with shared moral frameworks.

iii. *Rationalisation (RA):* Using discourses of reason, logic, problem-solution structures, or instrumental explanations, either theoretical (appealing to general principles) or instrumental (justifying actions by their outcomes).

iv. *Mythopoesis (MY):* Using discourses of heroic tales, cautionary narratives, or imagined futures that model desirable or undesirable behaviour.

These categories are not mutually exclusive; political actors often blend them to reinforce their narratives, especially on digital platforms, such as Twitter, which provide them hitherto unimaginable opportunities to perform legitimation. Although, in this paper, we focus only on legitimation practices, one must note that legitimation and de-legitimation often occur concurrently. Political actors in fact respond to each other's claims, making the entire process of legitimation a dynamic, contested process.

Lately, digital platforms have entirely reshaped legitimation practices by allowing emotional messaging, conflictual framing, and rapid circulation through digital spheres Chadwick, 2017). Hashtags function as "condensed frames" (Tufekci, 2017), "condensed arguments" (Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018), and "searchable talk" (Zappavigna, 2018), enabling users to

position actors, events, and moral judgements within recognisable narratives (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Digital platforms facilitate repetition through hashtags, which stabilises interpretations and sustains discursive publics (Yang, 2022). Similarly, algorithmic curation prioritises engagement over epistemic quality (Klinger & Svensson, 2025; Gillespie, 2018).

Previous studies of note (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Moffitt, 2016) have unveiled that populist movements heavily depend on charismatic authorisation and moral evaluation. Populism creates a Manichean divide between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004, Engesser, 2025) to make moral judgement central to legitimation. Mythopoesis works through heroic narratives that frame politics as a moral struggle (Moffitt, 2020) against the immoral. In Pakistan, populist discourse is not just a trend, but a communication strategy (Rafi & Manzoor, 2026).

The objective of this study was to examine the legitimation war between a populist movement (PTI) and an institutional coalition (PDM) that contested for legitimacy during pre- and post-9 May acute political crisis. It investigated how both groups deployed legitimation strategies to justify actions, frame events, and mobilise support across the juncture. We treat hashtags as sites of legitimation, which are sensitive to discursive form and socio-political context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, we adopt a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach that treats discourse as a socially embedded practice constitutive of power relations (Fairclough, 2015). Situating hashtags within broader political context, we employ CDA examine 'how they construct shared meanings, ideological polarisation, and in-group/out-group distinctions' (Wodak, 2015; van Dijk, 2006). Hence, van Leeuwen's legitimation framework is operationalised from a CDA perspective to identify discursive strategies employed by both parties and to interpret their role in broader struggle over meaning, hegemony, and political legitimacy.

Corpus Compilation

The corpus consists of trending political hashtags from Twitter covering the period April 2022–February 2024, encompassing two key events: the VONC (April 2022) and the 9 May 2023 crisis, extending to the general elections of February 2024. Due to Twitter policy change, hashtags were manually collected from the Twitter-trending archive (https://archive.twitter-trending.com). This way we downloaded daily trending topic pages for each month and saved them as PDFs while adhering to the criteria of partisan affiliation, political relevance, and visibility when selecting hashtags for analysis. This process yielded 20 monthly files.

We excluded hashtags with ambiguous affiliation or used by both sides. Urdu hashtags were translated by a bilingual researcher and reviewed by a second native Urdu speaker. Hashtags were selected for one of the four legitimation function. We were cautious that trending data might be influenced by coordinated activity, bot amplification, or platform curation; also, that Twitter user base may not be representative of the broader population, and platform affordances that shape visibility (Blank, 2017; Kreiss, et al., 2018).

We delimited our study to hashtag analysis because hashtags have been shown to compress complex arguments into cognitively accessible, affect-intensive claims that guide users' perception and alignment (Waisbord, 2018). We are obliged to agree with Zappavigna (2018), according to who, hashtags are discursive units which encapsulate broader narratives that enable large-scale mapping of meaning-making practices in digital spheres. Hashtags are not simply isolated expressions; rather, they are entry points into wider discursive formations. More importantly, they are inherently polysemic, which implies that their repeated patterned use across time enables identification of dominant discursive functions. Section 3.2 elaborates on our consensus coding approach that we used to code our hashtag data.

The compiled legitimation corpus as it stands comprised 103 unique hashtags: 62 (60%) were deployed by PTI and 41 (40%) by PDM. As for Urdu/English distribution, 89 (86%) were in Urdu (or Urdu-scripted) and only 14 (14%) in English. Throughout, we followed the principles of representativeness and balance for the corpus design (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998; Koester, 2010).

Consensus Coding Approach

Our legitimation subcorpus comprised 103 unique hashtags. We developed a coding scheme to assign van Leeuwen's legitimation categories (AU, ME, RA, and MY) to each hashtag in the corpus (see Table 1). To categorise them, we followed a collaborative consensus coding approach rather than independent statistical reliability testing (such as, Krippendorf Alpha, 2018, or Cohen's Kappa, 1960). Bearing in mind the interpretive depth required by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover latent political ideologies and power dynamics in digital discourse, we needed a framework that would capture nuanced political discourse. Hence, two researchers closely reviewed the hashtags together. Every primary category for each hashtag was recorded on the dominant discursive function as determined after interpretive consensus between the two coders. They coded only self-legitimation hashtags and ignored implicit delegitimation of opponents. The application of the coding scheme and the operational definitions of van Leeuwen's categories are presented in Table 1.

Through recursive peer debriefing, initial interpretive discrepancies regarding the legitimation strategies were thoroughly deliberated upon and negotiated until a 100% unanimous consensus was achieved. This deliberate, dialogic process was employed to ensure that the final coding framework was both critically rigorous and fully reconciled with a view to minimizing individual subjective bias while capturing the complex socio-political meanings embedded in the hashtags.

Table 1: Coding scheme for legitimation categories with hashtag examples.

Category	Operational Definition	Example Hashtags (English translation)
Authorisation (AU)	Invokes institutional, personal, or traditional authority to justify actions or claims.	#ImranKhanTheLeader, #ParliamentSupreme, #قومی_ہیرو_عمران_خان (National Hero Imran Khan)
Moral Evaluation (ME)	Frames actions or actors in moral binaries (justice/corruption, patriot/traitor, good/evil).	#HaqeeqiAzadi, #VoteLooters, #امپورٹڈ_حکومت_نامنظور (Imported Government Unacceptable)

Rationalisation (RA)	Presents actions as logical, necessary, or instrumentally effective for stability, economy, or governance.	#EarlyElectionsNow, #EconomyInCrisis, #RestoreDemocracy
Mythopoesis (MY)	Condenses heroic, cautionary, or victimhood narratives into a compact frame.	#KaptaanTheFighter, #May9BlackDay, #پھر_آئے_گا_کپتان (The Captain Shall Return)

Quantitative Indicators of Digital Visibility

Due to Twitter's policy change, automated extraction of precise trending metrics (e.g., exact hourly duration or peak rank for every hashtag) was not possible. However, the archived PDFs allowed us to make approximate observations of two indicators for the key hashtags (see Figure 1 below).

- Peak position: where a hashtag appeared in the daily trending list (top 3, 5, or 10)
- Duration: how long a hashtag remained in the top 30 (hourly, daily, multiple days)

They are not presented as precise, corpus-wide statistics but as supporting evidence for the relative salience of certain legitimation strategies. Our approach follows established practices in critical discourse studies of social media, where platform constraints often preclude fine-grained quantitative tracking (cf. Stieglitz et al., 2018; Zappavigna, 2018). While they do not capture audience reception or engagement (e.g., retweets, likes), they provide a standardised indicator of salience in the digital public sphere (cf. Stieglitz et al., 2018; Fan & Gordon, 2014; Cardoso, Ribeiro & Batista, 2025).



Fig. 1: Trending topics on a certain day (an example page).

The Pre-9 May Context: The Buildup

The 13-month period between the VONC (April 2022) and 9 May 2023 was dominated by two opposing moves: (1) PTI's intense and sustained attempt to reframe its parliamentary removal through VONC as an illegitimate, conspiratorial overthrow (#Cypher) and (2) PDM/state actors' vexed effort to counter PTI and establish themselves as lawful inheritors of state authority. The contest revolved around who could claim to speak for "the people," "the constitution," and "the nation." Towards this end, both sides deployed legitimation strategies to prove themselves upright, righteous, and legitimate custodians of the nation.

PTI Legitimation Strategies

Following its ouster via the VONC, which it framed as a "US-backed foreign conspiracy," PTI embarked upon a sustained campaign to legitimate its resistance against the new PDM coalition government. Analysis of PTI pre-9 May hashtag campaign revealed the following van Leeuwen (2007) key strategies (see Appendix-A, Table A-1).

Authorisation

Authorisation is legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, or persons with institutional standing. PTI employed personal and impersonal authorisation as legitimation strategies to (re)claim power.

Personal Authorisation: Charismatic Leadership

PTI's authorisation was vested overwhelmingly in the charismatic authority of Imran Khan. His history as a World Cup-winning captain, his philanthropic work, and his self-fashioned image as a pious, truthful leader (sadiq and ameen) were constantly invoked. Hashtags, for instance, #ImranKhanTheLeader, #BehindYouKaptaan, and #قومی_ہیرو_عمران_خان (National Hero Imran Khan) functioned as digital endorsements of his personal authority which accords with the notion of charismatic authority (Weber, 1978), which derives legitimacy from the leader's perceived extraordinary qualities rather than legal-institutional procedures (see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, on the notion of populist leadership). In tweets that accompanied these hashtags, supporters routinely hailed Imran Khan as the only leader who never betrayed Pakistan.

Impersonal Authorisation: The People as Source of Authority

Alongside personal authorisation, PTI employed impersonal authorisation through a populist appeal to "the people", people as authority (Mudde, 2004). The massive turnout at rallies across the country was construed not just as support but as a legitimate source of authority that outweighed parliamentary majority achieved through conspiratorial VONC, which was condemned through the hashtag, (#CypherConspiracy). Declaring the VONC as unconstitutional, PTI demanded fresh elections by deploying the hashtag #عوام_کی_مانگ_الیکشن (#PublicDemandsElections), which positioned popular will as the supreme authorising source. Foregrounding "*awaam*" (the people) as a legitimating source is characteristic of populist discourse (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2020). Also PTI spokespersons referenced international commentators, and sympathetic analysts as auxiliary figures of authority who "confirmed" the

party's democratic legitimacy. This move van Leeuwen (2007) terms as "expert authority" (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Moral Evaluation

Predominantly, PTI framed its struggle in absolute moral terms through a Manichean binary opposition. Hashtags were primarily framed as justice vs. corruption, freedom vs. slavery, national dignity vs. external subservience, and elite vs. the people, the last being the most favourite populist slogan.

PTI presented itself not just as a political party but as the trailblazer of #حقیقی_آزادی (Real Freedom) by deploying hashtags, such as, #حقیقی_آزادی_مارچ (#RealFreedomMarch) and #حقیقی_آزادی_جلسہ (#RealFreedomRally). The hashtag (#نکلو_پاکستان_کی_خاطر), rally for Pakistan's sake depicted PTI as the sole defender of Pakistan's sovereignty. Yet another hashtag, #امپورٹڈ_حکومت_نامنظور (#ImportedRegimeUnacceptable) — the most sustained political hashtag in Pakistan's Twitter history — created a moral binary between an illegitimate ("imported") and a legitimate ("indigenous") regime. There were other hashtags, such as, #VoteLooters, and #AmericanConspiracy that reinforced this moral crusade. By lambasting PDM as a mafia #عمران_بمقابلہ_کرپٹ_مافیاز (IK versus corrupt mafia), PTI dubbed its opposition as a sacred duty against a corrupt and immoral regime, showcasing Imran Khan as the saviour. According to Hameleers (2022), such moral framing is central to populist strategy (see also Engesser, 2025; Maly, 2025a, 2025b)). Such affective reinforcement becomes crucial in post-truth political environments because emotive narratives often trump factual accuracy (Harsin, 2015; Waisbord, 2018).

Rationalisation

The main, loud and clear, instrumental rationale that PTI presented for its protest was that only a strong public mandate expressed through immediate general elections could restore political and economic stability. "#PubicDemandsElections" was the main hashtag used to rally people around this goal.

PTI, through hashtags after hashtag, claimed that delaying elections would be costlier for the nation than holding them immediately. Hashtags like #EarlyElectionsNow and #RestoreDemocracyPK condensed this teleological argument. The argument was based on the pseudo-legal reasoning that the PDM government lacked constitutional legitimacy because of #CypherConspiracy and that only elections could restore stability. This instrumental logic appealed to the populace's pragmatic concerns about inflation and governance, framing PTI's resistance as a necessary means to a desirable end (cf. Fairclough, 2015, on instrumental rationality in political discourse).

Another rationalisation strategy that PTI deployed was empirical-instrumental. It presented data-driven arguments about its governance record — economic stability, social welfare initiatives (e.g., Ehsaas Program), and foreign policy autonomy — through hashtags like #PTIDelivers. Through this evidenced-based strategy, PTI portrayed itself as an efficient and future-oriented party, rationalising its resistance as a corrective to the PDM's alleged mismanagement.

Mythopoesis

In addition, PTI structured its narrative as a grand mythopoetic story of a struggle with Imran Khan as the righteous hero leading a 'pure nation' against a nexus of evil which is portrayed as a corrupt dynastic alliance (PDM), a manipulative external power, and a compromised "neutral" lobby.

This way, PTI was able to weave a sustained heroic narrative through other hashtags, like #KaptaanTheFighter, #PakistanStandsWithIK, and #FreedomStruggle. The hashtag, #غلامی نامنظور (slavery unacceptable) provided the ultimate reason for the struggle and became a powerful rallying slogan. The hashtag was in a way supportive of the most potent mythopoetic strategy of the #ForeignConspiracy narrative. Through the #CypherConspiracy hashtag, PTI projected itself as a victim of a clandestine plot devised by international actors and facilitated by domestic collaborators. Stories of betrayal, heroism, and resistance were shared in video montages and threaded with hashtags such as #ImportedGovernment, #AbsolutelyNot, and #CypherConspiracy.

This myth became a strong legitimating device. It positioned PTI as the defender of national sovereignty against external domination. It has been widely claimed that populist narratives, especially during crises, are performatively constructed (Moffitt, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2025; Cristofari & Gerbaudo, 2025; Ostiguy, Panizza & Moffitt, 2026). PTI's claim that VONC was a foreign conspiracy sustained its legitimacy within its support base. This conspiracy watchword framed later events, too — the 9 May 2023 attacks (#FalseFlag) and the February 2024 general elections (#TheForm47Conspiracy). This convincingly illustrates the durability of mythopoetic legitimation (see also Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009, on the narrative persistence of far-right populism).

PDM Legitimation Strategies

Notwithstanding coming into power through a constitutional process (VONC); PDM coalition required a fresh public mandate. It, therefore, had to tackle a significant legitimation deficit. Its strategies, as a result, were primarily defensive, which aimed to establish its own constitutional and institutional legitimacy (see Appendix-B, Table B-1).

Authorisation

Legitimation through authorisation may also be achieved by reference to institutional authority (laws, institutions) and expert (e.g. legal and technocrats), which are already accepted as legitimate (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94). PDM employed institutional and expert authorisation to achieve self-legitimation for its actions, especially VONC.

Institutional Authorisation

PDM attempted to ground its legitimation in the Constitution of Pakistan. By using hashtags like #ConstitutionWins, #RuleOfLaw, and #DemocracyUnderAttack, the coalition presented the VONC as a perfectly legal and democratic procedure. This was imperative since the PTI claimed that the VONC was the result of the #CypherConspiracy. Several hashtags invoking the authority of the higher courts (#SupremeCourt), parliamentary procedures, and the constitution were used to legitimate the transition of power. In van Leeuwen's framework, institutional

authorisation is one of strongest legitimation sources, as it draws on formal power structures (van Leeuwen, 2007). Several hashtags, like #PDMStandsWithPakistan, #BudgetForEconomicStability, and #SupremeCourtOfPakistan projected an image of responsible, albeit, unpopular, stewardship.

Expert Authorisation

To counter PTI's conspiracy narrative, PDM also exercised expert authorisation, citing economists, legal scholars, and international financial institutions. Expert commentary was used to legitimate the VONC as a routine democratic correction necessitated by PTI's economic mismanagement. Hashtags, such as, #EconomyInCrisis, #PTIFailed, #VONCConstitutional were deployed with expert commentaries. This appeal to expert authority aligns with van Leeuwen's (2007) category of impersonal authority and reflects a broader trend of technocratic legitimation in contemporary governance (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Moral Evaluation

To stabilise a volatile situation, PDM framed itself as the responsible adult in the room. To achieve this aim, it depicted as reckless, self-centred, and unwilling to respect institutions. It centred its narrative on moral responsibility to bring fiscal stability, repair foreign relations, and prevent "anarchy", castigating PTI for all the chaos. It deployed hashtags, like #StabilityFirst, #PakistanNeedsCalm, and #جمہوریت_بچاؤ (Save Democracy) to emphasise these values.

PDM's pre-9 May moral evaluation was built on the assertion that the VONC was a moral correction of PTI's failed governance. The PDM framed itself as the one safeguarding stability, institutional respect, civilian supremacy, and economic responsibility, while PTI was framed as destabilising, egocentric, and destructive. This use of moral binaries to legitimate one's own side while delegitimating the opponent is a common feature of polarised political discourse (Wodak, 2015).

Rationalisation

PDM's primary rationalisation was crisis management. The coalition propagated that the economic mess left by the PTI government required a period of stabilisation, making immediate elections imprudent. The rationale was that the state needed to be saved from economic collapse — a higher priority than fulfilling a political demand for polls. This instrumental logic positioned PDM as the responsible group making tough choices for the nation's long-term health, in stark contrast to PTI's "populist irresponsibility" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

PDM based its rationalisation strategy on economic argumentation, which formed the core of its strategy. There were hashtags after hashtags that attempted to highlight the inherited economic crisis and the urgent need for "difficult but necessary decisions." There were hashtags, like #IMFDeal and #EconomicStability that functioned as condensed rationales, invoking technocratic reasoning. This accords with van Leeuwen's (2008) category of "theoretical rationalisation," where actions are legitimated by reference to the natural order of things or to common-sense logic.

Mythopoesis

PDM deployed a cautionary tale, portraying Imran Khan as a dangerous populist, a "fascist," and a "liar" whose politics of agitation and confrontation with state institutions would lead the country into chaos and civil war. PDM painted a picture of anarchy through hashtags depicting PTI as an affliction (#ملک_دشمن_فتنہ), warning that PTI's freedom march was a march towards *barbadi* (destruction). This was a cautionary narrative that legitimated PDM's rule as a necessary bulwark against impending doom.

Similarly, the oft-repeated phrase "No leader above the Constitution" became mythopoetic, invoking historical precedent to justify the VONC as constitutional. Employing restorative mythopoesis, PDM narrated stories of past stability under their governance and promised a return to normalcy by using hashtags, such as, #PakistanAwaitsNawazSharif and #خادم_پاکستان (Servant of Pakistan), an epithet used for Shehbaz Sharif, implying that Pakistan had deviated under PTI and needed to be "brought back" to institutional order. Such cautionary tales serve as powerful legitimation devices in times of crisis, as they frame the incumbent leadership as the guarantor of national survival.

The 9 May Rupture and the Aftermath

The violent protests and riots that erupted on the eve of 9 May 2023 after Imran Khan's dramatic arrest, altered the political landscape of the country. This was a "critical juncture" (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007), a "discursive rupture" (Foucault, 1969/2002) which dramatically reconfigured narrative structure, opportunities, and constraints. The pre-9 May battle of narratives to (re)claim power evolved into a post-9 May war for survival and moral high ground. Both sides intensified their legitimation strategies, becoming highly polarised.

PTI Legitimation Strategies (Post-9 May)

Following the 9 May events, PTI faced an unprecedented crisis of political credibility. Its leader and thousands of workers were arrested, the party was subjected to a severe state-backed crackdown, and a dominant state narrative labelled it a terrorist organization. PTI's discursive strategies pivoted dramatically from a narrative of victorious populism to one of victimhood, resistance, and systemic injustice. (see Appendix-A, Table A-2).

Authorisation

Personal Authorisation

Notwithstanding being in prison, Imran Khan remained PTI's primary resource and inspiration for authorisation. Hashtags, like #ReleaseImranKhan, #BehindYouSkipper, and #KaptaanHamariRedLine contained this logic. There were tweets which asserted that "Chairman has always called for peaceful protest" and that "he would never condone violence." Imran Khan's message of "struggle must remain constitutional" circulated again and again. This is reliance on "charismatic authority" which is typical of leader-centric populist movements facing state repression (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Guriev & Treisman, 2024).

Impersonal Authorisation

However, with its charismatic leader imprisoned and much of its senior leadership coerced into either leaving the party or jailed, PTI strategically shifted to an impersonal authorisation vested in the very "idea" of Imran Khan and the party (#ImranKhanIsAnIdea). Imran Khan's message from prison — "PTI is an idea, and you cannot imprison an idea" — was disseminated through his lawyers and social media to implement this form of authorisation. Through abstract authorisation, PTI aimed to convince its support base that the party's legitimacy was no longer contingent on its organisational structure or the freedom of its leaders, but on its enduring appeal as a symbol of resistance. This move reflects van Leeuwen's (2007) notion of "traditional authority" transmuted into ideological continuity.

Public and Expert Authorisation

In addition, PTI relied on popular sovereign authorisation. This type of authorisation asserted that legitimation arises from mass public support, which PTI enjoyed. There were hashtags, like #میں_بھی_عمران_خان_ہوں (I am Imran Khan), #پاکستان_کا_فیصلہ_عمران_خان (Pakistan decides: only IK), #میں_کپتان_کیساتھ_ہوں (I am with the Captain), #میں_پی_ٹی_آئی_ہوں (I am PTI), and #قوم_کی_طاقت_عمران (Imran: Nation's strength) used the will of the people as the primary source of legitimacy.

Additionally, PTI invoked human rights organisations (e.g., Amnesty International) to bolster claims of state highhandedness, using hashtags like #HumanRightsViolationsInPakistan. This form of expert authorisation relied on external bodies perceived as impartial and globally legitimate (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Moral Evaluation

Victimhood and Oppression

PTI changed its primary legitimation strategy to framing itself as the victim of a brutal, unjust, and disproportionate state response, a strategy widely observed in digitally mediated repression contexts (Tufekci, 2017). PTI portrayed the crackdown as collective punishment meted out to an entire political party and its millions of supporters for the alleged actions of the unknown. This was a strong moral appeal to principles of proportionality, justice, and fairness. Hashtags like #ReleasePTIWorkers and #آزادی_مارچ_نہیں_انسانی_حقوق (Not Freedom, Human Rights March) framed the state as oppressor and PTI supporters as peaceful victims.

PTI constructed a moral binary through many frames:

- May9BlackDay frame projected the day as a tragedy inflicted by the state.
- Martyrdom frame included images of Zille Shah (killed during protests) were circulated with #JusticeForZilleShah and #شہداء_کو_سلام (Salute to Martyrs) hashtags.
- Sacred Attack counter-frame: Through the use of this this frame, PTI vehemently denied that were involved in alleged attacks on military assets. #FalseFlagMay9 and

#WeArePeaceful were the hashtags it used to claim that the entire episode was an orchestrated drama to malign PTI.

- State-Cruelty Frame: To highlight alleged PDM/state highhandedness and excesses, PTI deployed hashtags, like #StateCruelty and #ظلم_کی_انتہا (The Height of Cruelty) to morally condemn PDM.

PTI used moralisation and mythopoesis simultaneously by juxtaposing political mobilisation with quasi-sacred moral principles. This "moralised political discourse" is what Hameleers (2022) identify as a key feature of post-truth populism.

Rationalisation

PTI presented rationalising arguments grounded in practical and theoretical reasoning. Four rationalisation strategies emerged:

i. *Instrumental rationalisation:* PTI claimed that the protests were peaceful and that vandalism was the work of "infiltrators" to discredit the party. PTI deployed hashtags (#ConspiracyAgaisntPTIExposed and #PakistanUnderStateFascism) which suggested that non-PTI agents within the crowd executed the attacks.

ii. *Theoretical rationalisation*: The party invoked broader principles of civil liberties, human rights, and constitutionalism: #انسانی_حقوق_کا_احترام (Respect human rights), the constitutional right to rally and political dissent.

iii. *Denial rationalisation*: PTI claimed that 9 May was a false flag operation (#9MayFalseFlag) to discredit the party. State actors as infiltrators became a recurring refrain.

iv. *Emotional rationalisation*: The pubic reacted out of anger because their leader was arrested. PTI claimed that, in all likelihood, the violence seemed spontaneous because of the uncontrollable rage that the public felt rather than it being a planned operation. Several hashtags, such as, #عمران_خان_ہماری_ریڈ_لائن (#IKOurRedLline), #میں_بھی_عمران_خان_ہوں (I'm Imran Khan), #نکلو_خان_کی_زندگی_بچاؤ (OutOutSaveKhan), and #عمران_خان_کو_رہا_کرو (Release Khan).

These rationalisations strategies framed the 9 May events as an unavoidable public response rather than a coordinated attack, absolving PTI leadership of responsibility. This logical structure justified the party's innocence and delegitimated state actions (cf. Fairclough, 2015, on strategic rationalisation in political discourse).

Mythopoesis

The pre-9 May conspiracy "moral tale" transformed into a "martyrdom tale." PTI framed all state actions against itself — arrests, alleged torture of workers, press blackouts — as *qurbani* (sacrifices) that were deemed necessary for the ultimate triumph of truth if it were to triumph. There were the hashtags, like #TheCaptainShallReturn (#پھر_آئے_گا_کپتان) and #IKStandsSteadfast that served to keep a mythopoetic hope alive. The hope was weaved around the heroic narrative of

Khan as the incorruptible protagonist unjustly imprisoned and supporters as freedom fighters who were persecuted by tyrannous state as the antagonist.

There were two dominant mythopoetic strands that emerged:

- *Narrative of Persecution:* PTI used classic tragic narratives (van Leeuwen, 2008) based on the plot of a virtuous hero (Khan) wrongly persecuted by an unjust system, whose eventual triumph is inevitable. References were made to Nelson Mandela and his imprisonment.

- *Narrative of Sacrifices*: PTI employed mythopoetic legitimation by heroizing PTI activists as secular martyrs in the struggle for "real freedom." To augment the strategy, posts about and images of Zille Shah were redeployed, framing him and other supporters as martyrs.

These mythopoetic constructions aimed to elevate PTI's struggle from a simple political conflict to a moral epic. This sustained the morale amongst the workers during intense crackdown. Such mythopoetic narratives are central to maintaining cohesion within populist movements in the face of intense institutional opposition (Krzyżanowski & Wodak (2009).

PDM Legitimation Strategies (Post-9 May)

For the PDM government and the state institutions, the 9 May events provided a powerful, tangible justification for their pre-existing narrative about PTI's dangerous nature. Their strategies shifted from defending economic performance to championing a national cause: the defence of the state against internal enemies. The PDM/state combined narrative enjoyed overwhelming strategic advantages. It had control over the media ecosystem, championing state-centric nationalism, and the ability to combine discourse with material enforcement through state apparatus. (see Appendix-B, Table B-2).

Authorisation

Institutional Authorisation

After 9 May, PDM/state actors employed the strategy of "authorisation by institution" (van Leeuwen, 2007) with unprecedented force. They framed statements from the military's media wing (ISPR), the Interior Ministry, police, and the judiciary as authoritative and final. Hashtags to this effect, such as #ISPR, #PakArmyZindabad, and #SacredDuty circulated widely, signalling that the state's response was legally and morally sanctioned. Through hashtags as #قانون_سب_کے_لیے_ایکساں (Law is Equal for All), the PDM/state tried to justify and legitimate the crackdown as well as the invocation of Article 245 (calling out the military for civil power), sedition laws, and anti-terrorism provisions.

Legal and National Identity Authority

Similarly, to reinforce the message that the rule of law was being upheld, PDM/state relied on legal authority by citing court-sanctioned remands and military trials and emphasising it through hashtags like #NoOneAboveTheLaw and #CourtDecisionsRespected. To frame PTI as anti-Pakistan, National identity authority was invoked through hashtags, for instance, #EnemiesOfPakistan, that demanded support for the state as a patriotic duty.

Moral Evaluation

PDM/state actors intensified moral evaluation by framing PTI supporters as "arsonists," "traitors," and "terrorists." The moral universe here positioned the military as the guardian of national honour and portrayed PTI as violating the sacred boundaries of patriotism. Hashtags such as #May9Riots, #May9BlackDay, #TerroristsOfMay9, and #Gaddaron_SeNiptonaHoga (Traitors must be dealt with) equated attacks on military installations with attacks on the very soul of the nation.

This black-and-white moral evaluation left no room for a dialogue. PDM actors repeatedly framed the army as the "guardian" of the nation. It framed attacks on the military as attacks on the state of Pakistan. This led to the sanctification of military symbols (Brubaker, 2025) — e.g., #JinnahHouse for the Corps Commander House — to engender a moral outrage against PTI and justify extraordinary measures (Wodak, 2015). To collectively blaming PTI supporters as rioters was a deliberate strategy to legitimate state actions against it. In response to PTI's affect-driven moralisation, PDM based its legitimation drive on institutional and bureaucratic abstraction, which proved less resonant but more durable.

Rationalisation

PDM/state actors' efforts were focused on framing their actions justified, necessary, inevitable, and proportionate. To achieve this aim, they used two types of rationalisation strategies, instrumental and theoretical.

Instrumental Rationalisation: The crackdown was presented as a difficult but essential procedure for the long-term health of the nation. PDM/state used bureaucratic, procedural language to justify the crackdown: "Due process will be followed," "Trials under the Army Act are justified," and "No nation tolerates attacks on its military." This was propagated through hashtags, like #RuleOfLaw and #NationalSecurity, #آئین_بچاؤ_پاکستان_بچاؤ (Save Constitution to save Pakistan) and #عدل_بحال_کرانا_ہے (Justice shall be restored), which underscored this logic.

Theoretical Rationalisation: Through hashtags, like #PTIIsCancer, PDM tried to rationalise state actions as necessary surgical operation to remove a "cancer" from the body politic. It framed the country-wide crackdown and arrests as a necessary action to identify and punish the alleged "miscreants" (#PTIMiscreants) to protect national security, institutional integrity, and public property. Such rationalisations align with what van Leeuwen (2008) calls "theoretical rationalisation," where actions are legitimated by reference to abstract principles or the natural order of things (e.g., "a state must defend itself").

Mythopoesis

The most powerful mythopoetic narrative was the transformation of 9 May into a moral parable of treason and national betrayal. PDM's cautionary tale from the pre-9 May period was presented as a prophecy fulfilled. The post-9 May narrative achieved the status of a nationalist epic, thematising that the state, as guardian of order, had decisively crushed the forces of chaos and anarchy that PTI allegedly represented.

PDM structured its cautionary tale as under:

- It presented PTI as the group that violated the sanctity of the state and military installations (the antagonist).
- It characterised the army as the steadfast guardian which is protecting Pakistan from internal enemies (the protagonist).
- It represented 9 May as the climax, a "never again" moment, which must be remembered as a sacred red line in national history.

This cautionary mythopoetic narrative recalled the historical trauma narrative of the country's dismemberment in 1971 by framing 9 May attacks on GHQ as a doomsday moment (#9MayBlackDay). To reinforce this narrative and to justify treating PTI as an existential threat to Pakistan, stories of past martyrs, soldiers, and national sacrifice were widely circulated and emphasised through the tweets — "The nation will never forget this black day" and "May 9 will be written in history as the day traitors exposed themselves" — which illustrated the transformation of a political event into a national mythopoetic lesson (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009).

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that PTI and PDM employed distinct legitimation repertoires which they revamped dramatically after the 9 May rupture. In the pre-9 May period, PTI was on the offensive (due to VONC) in its legitimation drive. It used an eclectic combination of charismatic authorisation, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis, which proved highly effective in mobilising digital as well as street support. PTI hashtags, therefore, enjoyed higher mean peak ranking and longer average trending duration than those of PDM. For instance, #امپورٹڈ_حکومت_نامنظور trended in the top five for over 48 hours across multiple days, whereas no PDM hashtag sustained similar traction. This is in accord with previous finings that show that populist moral appeals often dominate institutional rationalisation in post-truth contexts (Hameleers, 2022; Moffitt, 2020). That is why we observe the dominance of moral evaluation and mythopoesis over empirically verifiable claims across both corpora.

Findings reveal that PTI's digital dominance did not translate into political dominance, an anomaly increasingly noted in recent research on platform politics (Kreiss, 2016). Contrarily, PDM/state legitimation was less visible digitally, but provided material control because it was anchored in institutions. This suggests that legitimation effectiveness must be assessed across multiple arenas: the digital public sphere and the institutional domain (Tucker et al., 2021).

The 9 May juncture forced the two sides to recalibrate strategies. PTI shifted to victimhood-based legitimation, centred on moral evaluation and martyrdom mythopoesis, successfully retaining core support despite crackdown whereas DM/state consolidated a nationalist frame that dominated electronic media but did not fully capture the digital sphere, despite digitally-driven, shaped by algorithmic visibility and virality logics.

This study thus demonstrates a distinction between digital legitimacy and institutional legitimacy, suggesting a dual-track model of political power in hybrid regimes. Our findings contribute to the concept of digital legitimation in major ways. First, they extend van Leeuwen's

framework to hashtag analysis by demonstrating its applicability to condensed digital discourse. Second, they provide empirical evidence from a non-Western country, where the nature of legitimation strategies depend on language choice (Urdu/English) and a powerful establishment — factors that complicate the populism-institutionalism binary (Yang, 2022). Third, they suggest that post-truth digital practices may also characterise political conflicts in other countries also (Harsin, 2015; Hameleers, 2022). In Pakistan, the Urdu/English split reflects stratified political publics, with Urdu enabling mass affective mobilisation and English indexing elite institutional discourse. This may be true of other multilingual nations.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined Twitter hashtags deployed by PTI and PDM to achieve digital legitimation before and after the 9 May 2023 rupture. Applying van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) framework to a corpus of trending hashtags, we identified distinct legitimation repertoires that transformed dramatically after the rupture. PTI's legitimation, which was based in charismatic authorisation, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis, achieved greater digital visibility but succumbed to institutional marginalisation. PDM/state legitimation, anchored in institutional authorisation and rationalisation, dominated formal politics but struggled against PTI's emotional acceptance among digital publics.

Digital visibility was ascertained by trending-rank and duration, according to which PTI consistently outperformed PDM, which, however, may not equate to audience reception or political victory. Future research, therefore, should incorporate audience reception data, such as retweet patterns or survey-based measures of narrative acceptance (Hameleers, 2022).

Three limitations must be noted. First, following Zappavigna (2018) who has shown that hashtags serve as salient condensations of political meaning, making them appropriate for large-scale discursive mapping, we focused exclusively on hashtags which excluded the discursive elaboration found in full tweets. Second, the coding process involved interpretive decisions that may reflect researcher positionality, though we attempted to mitigate this through transparent collaborative coding. Third, the post-9 May period was shorter than the pre-9 May period; but we treated the two qualitatively rather than volumetrically.

However, these limitations do not constrain this paper from claiming four notable contributions to discourse studies. First, it provides a systematic, empirically grounded account of how legitimation operates discursively during a crisis. Second, it provides a replicable methodology for studying political legitimation in digital spheres by operationalising van Leeuwen's framework for hashtag analysis. Third, it empirically demonstrates that legitimation strategies based on moral evaluation and mythopoesis can achieve greater digital traction than those grounded in institutional authorisation and rationalisation, particularly in a post-truth environment where emotional resonance often outweighs factual argument (Harsin, 2015; Hameleers, 2022; Waisbord, 2018). And lastly, it demonstrates that institutional legitimation, though less emotionally engaging, can amass durable political power when supported by state resources. This research thus highlights the intricate interplay of digital discourse, institutional authority, and the struggle for legitimacy in polarized democracies (Tucker et al., 2021; Yang, 2022). While PTI's narratives appear more emotionally effective, their reliance on conspiracy logics complicates normative assessment of democratic legitimacy; and PDM's use of state

apparatus to quench PTI precluded the true estimate of the force of their narrative. It would be interesting to compare the digital narratives of both sides when none is in power without recourse to state apparatus.

REFERENCES

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). Digital media and the personalization of collective action: Social technology and the organization of protests against the global economic crisis. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 739–768. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878

Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Reppen, R. (1998). *Corpus linguistics: Investigating language structure and use*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511804533

Blank, G. (2017). The digital divide among Twitter users and its implications for social research. *Social Science Computer Review*, *35*(6), 679–697. DOI: 10.1177/0894439316671698

Bonilla, Y., & Rosa, J. (2015). #Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *American Ethnologist*, *42*(1), 4–17. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12112

Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. (2011). The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics. In *Proceedings of the 6th European Consortium for Political Research General Conference*. European Consortium for Political Research.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, *47*(1), 2–16. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9248.00184

Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, *59*(3), 341–369. doi.10.1017/S0043887100020852.

Cardoso, M., Ribeiro, E., & Batista, F. (2025). Portuguese far-right discourse on social media: Insights from topic modeling. *OpenAccess Series in Informatics (OASIcs)*, *115*, 12–25.

Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190696726.001.0001

Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20(1), 37–46.

Cristofari, G., & Gerbaudo, P. (2025). Towards an empowered 'platform state'? Digital platforms, infrastructural power, and the transformation of state authority. In *Proceedings of the 26th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research* (pp. 45–58). Delft University of Technology.

Engesser, S. (2025). Populist strategy. In A. Nai, M. Grömping, & D. Wirz (Eds.), *Elgar encyclopedia of political communication* (pp. 304–307). Edward Elgar Publishing. DOI: 10.4337/9781035301447.ch76

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(4), 51–58. DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Fairclough, N. (2015). *Language and power* (3rd ed.). Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315857510

Fan, W., & Gordon, M. D. (2014). The power of social media analytics. *Communications of the ACM*, *57*(6), 74–81. DOI: 10.1145/2602574

Foucault, M. (2002). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1969).

Gerbaudo, P. (2025). Transition without transformation? The strategic limits of NextGenerationEU. *Globalizations*, 1–17.

Ghauri, M. J., Alam, R., & Khan, M. R. (2023). Political discourse and the public response on the 'regime change' in Pakistan (2022): A thematic analysis of Twitter handles of the leading politicians. Journal of Development and Social Sciences, 4(2), 604–623. https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2023(4-II)54

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press. DOI: 10.12987/9780300242508

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action: Vol. 1. Reason and the rationalization of society*. Beacon Press.

Hameleers, M. (2020). Populist disinformation: Exploring intersections between online populism and disinformation in the US and the Netherlands. *Politics and Governance*, *8*(1), 146–157. DOI: 10.17645/pag.v8i1.2478

Hameleers, M. (2022). *Populist disinformation in fragmented information settings*. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781003201106

Harsin, J. (2015). Regimes of post-truth, post-politics, and attention economies. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *8*(2), 327–333. DOI: 10.1111/cccr.12097

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press. DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/10858.001.0001

Kalpokas, I. (2019). *A Political Theory of Post-Truth.* Palgrave

Keyes, R. (2004). *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*. St. Martin's Press.

Klinger, U., & Svensson, J. (2025). Media logic. In A. Nai, M. Grömping, & D. Wirz (Eds.), *Elgar encyclopedia of political communication* (pp. 461–464). Edward Elgar Publishing. DOI: 10.4337/9781035301447.vol2.00112

Koester, A. (2010). Building small specialised corpora. In A. O'Keeffe & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of corpus linguistics* (pp. 66–79). Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203856949-6.

Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype Politics: Technology-intensive campaigning and the data of the American electorate*. Oxford University Press.

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). In their own words: Political practitioner accounts of candidates, audiences, affordances, genres, and timing in strategic social media use. *Political Communication*, *35*(1), 8–31.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.

Krzyżanowski, M., & Wodak, R. (Eds.). (2009). *The politics of exclusion: Debating migration in Austria*. Transaction Publishers.

Maly, I. (2025a). Discourse analysis of social media. In *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*. Wiley Online Library.

Maly, I. (2025b). How Big Tech "uses of heritage" help to build Big Tech power. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1–15.

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press. DOI: 10.1515/9780804799331

Moffitt, B. (2020). *Populism*. Polity.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541–563. DOI: 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780190234874.001.0001

Ostiguy, P., Panizza, F., & Moffitt, B. (Eds.). (2026). *Populism in global perspective: A performative and discursive approach*. Routledge.

Rafi, M. S. (2025). Communication of Pakistani politicians while in government and opposition and their followers' reactions in the digital discourse. *Discourse & Communication*, 19(3), 500–521. https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813241310584

Rafi, M. S., & Manzoor, Z. (2026). Competing populist narratives in Pakistan: A discourse analysis of politicians, digital citizens, and bureaucratic counter-narratives. *Discourse & Society.* (Advance online publication). https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265261416056

Salam-Salmaoui, R., & Salam, S. (2023). Twitter and politics: A framing analysis of Maryam Nawaz and Imran Khan's social media discourse. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, 1276639. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1276639

Stieglitz, S., Mirbabaie, M., Ross, B., & Neuberger, C. (2018). Social media analytics: Challenges in topic discovery, data collection, and analysis. *International Journal of Information Management, 39,* 156–168. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2017.10.002

Tucker, J. A., et al. (2021). Social media and political change. *Annual Review of Political Science, 24*(1), 91–112. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102015

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

Vaara, E., Aranda, A. M., & Etchanchu, H. (2024). Discursive legitimation: An integrative theoretical framework and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management, 50*(6), 2343–2373. DOI: 10.1177/01492063241230511

van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.

van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Politics, ideology, and discourse. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 728–740). Elsevier. DOI: 10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/00722-7

van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication, 1*(1), 91–112. DOI: 10.1177/1750481307071986

van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195323306.001.0001

Waisbord, S. (2018). The elective affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics. *Communication Research and Practice, 4*(1), 17–34. DOI: 10.1080/22041451.2018.1428928

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. University of California Press.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What Radmilla populist discourses mean*. Sage. DOI: 10.4135/9781446270073

Yang, G. (Ed.). (2020). *Digital activism in Asia reader*. Asiascape.

Yu, X., & Zheng, H. (2023). An overview of research on discursive legitimation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences, 11*(10), 112–127. DOI: 10.4236/jss.2023.1110008

Zoglauer, T. (2023). *Constructed truths: Truth and knowledge in a post-truth world*. Springer Vieweg.

Zappavigna, M. (2012). *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*. Continuum.

Zappavigna, M. (2018). *Searchable talk: Hashtags and social media metadiscourse*. Bloomsbury. DOI: 10.5040/9781474292320.

Appendix-A

PTI Legitimation Hashtags

Table A-1: PTI Legitimation Strategies (Pre–9 May Hashtags)

Strategy	Hashtag (Original)	Translation	Legitimation Logic
Authorisation	#صادق_و_امین_عمران_خان	Imran Khan is truthful and honest	Religious-constitutional moral authority (Sadiq/Ameen standard)
	#PakistanNeedsImranKhan	Pakistan needs Imran Khan	Necessity-based leadership legitimacy
	#ImranKhanPrimeMinister	Imran Khan is PM	Institutional authority claim
	#PMImranKhanTill2033	Shall complete term and win again	Temporal extension of political authority
	#کپتان_تیار_ہے	Captain is ready	Leadership readiness as authority
	#ایک_نیازی_سب_پہ_بھاری	One Niazi outweighs all	Charismatic personal authority
	#PunjabKaptaanKa	Punjab belongs to the Captain	Territorial-political authority
	#قوم_کا_ہیرو_عمران_خان	Imran Khan, national hero	Symbolic/heroic authority
Moral Evaluation	#امپورٹڈ_حکومت_نامنظور	Imported government unacceptable	Moral rejection of ruling regime
	#مہنگائی_نامنظور	Inflation unacceptable	Normative-economic stance
	#نااہل_کرپٹ_غلام_حکومت	Incompetent, corrupt, enslaved govt	Ethical delegitimation
	#کیا_غدار_حکومت_کرینگے	Shall traitors rule?	Moral condemnation
	#CrimeMinisterRejected	Prime vs. Crime	Corruption-based rejection
	#مجبور_عوام_عیاش_حکمران	Helpless public, indulgent rulers	Moral contrast (people vs elites)
	#غلامو_پاکستان_کتنے_میں_بیچا	For how much did you sell Pakistan?	Nationalist moral outrage
Rationalisation	#لیکشن_کراو_پاکستان_بچاو	Hold elections to save Pakistan	Instrumental logic (means–end)
	#PakistanNeedsElections	Demand for fresh elections	Procedural-democratic justification
	#عدم_اعتماد_بیرونی_سازش	No-confidence is a foreign conspiracy	Causal explanation
	#سازش_نہیں_مداخلت	Not conspiracy but interference	Reframing causality

	#سازش_ہی_تھی	It was indeed a conspiracy	Reinforced causal narrative
	#MandateVsMafia	Mandate vs mafia	Political logic dichotomy
	#RegimeChangeInPakistan	----	Structural explanation
	#امپورٹڈ_بجٹ_نامنظور	Imported budget unacceptable	Policy critique logic
Mythopoesis	#حقیقی_آزادی_مارچ	Real Freedom March	Liberation narrative
	#آخری_سانس_تک_عمران_خان	With Imran till last breath	Loyalty/sacrifice narrative
	#یہ_بازی_خان_ہی_جیتے_گا	Khan will win this game	Predestined victory
	#ہر_سازش_ہوگی_ناکام	Every conspiracy shall fail	Moral triumph narrative
	#نوجوان_بدلے_گا_پاکستان	Youth will transform Pakistan	Future-oriented transformation
	#خان_واپس_آرہا_ہے	Khan is coming back	Return-of-hero narrative
	#چلو_چلو_عمران_کے_ساتھ	Let's march with Imran	Collective mobilisation story
	#میں_تمہارے_ساتھ_ہوں	I am with you	Solidarity narrative
	#BehindYouSkipper	----	Leader–follower myth

Appendix-A (Contd.)

Table A-2. PTI Legitimation Strategies (Post–9 May Hashtags)

Strategy	Hashtag (Original)	Translation	Legitimation Logic
Authorisation	#عمران_صادق_اور_آمین_ثابت	Imran proven truthful and honest	Religious-constitutional moral authority (Sadiq/Ameen)
	#قومی_لیڈر_صرف_خان	Only Khan is the national leader	Exclusive leadership authority
	#قوم_کا_فیصلہ_صرف_خان	Nation's decision: only Khan	Popular sovereignty as authority
	#پاکستان_کا_فیصلہ_عمران_خان	Pakistan decides: Imran Khan	National will as legitimating source
	#میرا_انتخاب_کپتان	My choice: the Captain	Electoral-authoritative endorsement
	#عوام_کی_ضد_عمران_خان	Public insistence: Imran Khan	Collective will as authority
	#عوام_لائے_گی_عمران_کو	Public will bring back Imran	Democratic restoration claim
Moral Evaluation	#مافیا_نہیں_پاکستان_بچاو	Save Pakistan, not the mafia	Moral dichotomy (nation vs corrupt elite)
	#عمران_خان_پر_ظلم_نامنظور	Cruelty to IK unacceptable	Ethical rejection of injustice
	#ناحق_قید_عمران_خان	Imran unjustly imprisoned	Moral victimhood framing
	#جیل_ٹرائل_نامنظور	Jail trial unacceptable	Normative critique of legal process
	#ہو_گئی_انصاف_کی_موت	Justice is dead	Moral collapse of system

	#ظلم_کا_بدلہ_ووٹ_سے	Revenge through vote	Moral-democratic corrective
	#ایک_اور_1971_نامنظور	Another 1971 unacceptable	Historical moral warning
Rationalisation	#ConspiracyAgainstPTIExposed	—	Causal explanation (political victimisation)
	#May9th_FalseFlag	—	Alternative causal narrative
	#سائفر_ایک_حقیقت	Cypher is a reality	Evidence-based justification claim
	#لندن_پلان_نامنظور	London plan unacceptable	Strategic-political explanation
	#سازش_نہیں_مقابلہ_کرو	Compete, not conspire	Normative procedural logic
	#ImranKhanNeedsJustice	—	Legal-rational justification
	#FairTrialForImranKhan	—	Due process legitimisation
Mythopoesis	#عمران_خان_ایک_نظریہ_ہے	Imran Khan is an ideology	Ideological transcendence narrative
	#خان_کا_گناہ_وطن_سےوفا	Khan's crime: loyalty to country	Hero–victim moral story
	#عمران_خان_تو_آئےگا	Imran shall return	Inevitable return narrative
	#عمران_ہی_ہوگا	It shall be Imran	Predestined leadership
	#عمران_ہی_ہوگا_وزیراعظم	Imran shall be the PM	Teleological political destiny
	#قوم_کی_آکسیجن_عمران_خان	Imran is nation's oxygen	Existential dependency narrative
	#قوم_کی_شہ_رگ_عمران_خان	Imran is nation's lifeline	Survival metaphor
	#عمران_خان_سرخرو	Imran vindicated	Moral victory narrative
	#سرخرو_ہوا_کپتان_ہمارا	Our captain vindicated	Collective vindication story

Appendix-B

PDM Legitimation Hashtags

Table B-1:> PDM Legitimation Strategies (Pre-9 May Hashtags)

Category	Hashtag (Original)	Translation	Legitimation Logic
Authorisation	#سپریم_کورٹ	Supreme Court	Invokes judicial authority to legitimise political claims and decisions
	#آئین_شکن_جج_فارغ_کرو	Remove unconstitutional judges	Appeals to constitutional authority to justify political action
	#آرٹیکل6_لگاو_ملک_بچاو	Invoke Article 6 to save the country	Uses constitutional/legal framework as basis of legitimacy
	#وزیرعظم_شہبازشریف	Shehbaz Sharif is Prime Minister	Asserts formal political authority and leadership legitimacy
	#عوام_ن_کے_ساتھ	Public stands with PML-N	Claims popular mandate as a source of legitimacy
Moral Evaluation	#عمران_جھوٹا	Imran the liar	Constructs opponent as morally deficient
	#غدار_عمران_ہے	Imran is a traitor	Frames opponent as disloyal to the nation
	#ملک_دشمن_فتنہ	Enemy of the state, a mischief-maker	Moral stigmatisation as threat to national order

	#عمران_نہ_صادق_نہ_امین	Imran neither truthful nor honest	Challenges ethical and religious credibility
	#پی_ٹی_آئی_کی_چوری_پکڑی_گئی	PTI caught stealing	Constructs corruption as moral failure
Rationalisation	#فارن_فنڈنگ_کا_فیصلہ_دو	Decide the foreign funding case	Legitimises stance through legal-procedural reasoning
	#فارن_فنڈنگ_پر_سزا_دو	Punish for foreign funding	Justifies punishment based on rule-based accountability
	#مہنگائی_مکاؤ_مارچ	End inflation march	Grounds mobilisation in economic problem-solution logic
	#بجٹ_برائے_معاشی_استحکام	Budget for economic stability	Legitimises governance through technocratic/economic reasoning
	#سازش_کا_ڈرامہ_لیک_ہوگیا	Conspiracy drama exposed	Frames opponent narrative as false through causal explanation
Mythopoesis	#شیر_کا_سال	Year of the Lion	Constructs symbolic narrative of political resurgence (PML-N as "lion")
	#فیصلہ_صرف_نواز_کا	Only Nawaz will decide	Personalises authority in a heroic/central leader figure
	#نوازشریف_سچا_تھا	Nawaz was truthful/right	Retrospective vindication narrative
	#خوش_آمدید_امید_سحر	Welcome, hope of a new dawn (epithet used for Maryam)	Constructs future-oriented redemption narrative
	#عوام_کی_جیت	Victory of the people	Builds collective triumph narrative
	#مریم_جیت_گئی	Maryam has won	Personalised victory narrative reinforcing leadership legitimacy

Appendix-B (Contd.)

Table B-2: PDM Legitimation Strategies (Post-9 May Hashtags)

Category	Hashtag (Original)	Translation	Legitimation Logic
Authorisation	#آئین_بچاؤ_پاکستان_بچاؤ	Save Pakistan, save the Constitution	Invokes constitutional authority as the basis for political legitimacy
	#عدل_بحال_کرانا_ہے	Justice must be established	Appeals to institutional/legal authority to justify political action
	#سپریم_کورٹ_آف_پاکستان	Supreme Court of Pakistan	Grounds legitimacy in judicial authority
	#آرٹیکل_6	Article 6	References constitutional/legal provision to legitimise accountability
	#الیکشن_نتائج_کالعدم_قرار_دو	Annul election results	Appeals to procedural/legal authority to contest outcomes
Moral Evaluation	#سانحہ_9_مئی_کا_مجرم_عمران	Imran, the criminal of 9 May	Constructs opponent as criminal and morally culpable
	#اسرائیل_کا_یار_غدار	Friend of Israel is a traitor	Frames opponent as disloyal and morally deviant
	#غدار_فتنے_نہیں_چھوڑیں_گے	Will not spare traitorous miscreants	Moral condemnation of opponents as threats to national order

	#ساس_جیتی_انصاف_ہارا	Justice loses; mother-in-law wins	Delegitimises judicial outcomes as morally compromised
	#اصلی_نسلی_لاڈلا_چور	The favourite, the real thief	Constructs opponent as inherently corrupt
Rationalisation	#بدحالی_سے_خوشحالی_کا_سفر	From adversity to prosperity	Justifies governance through developmental/causal narrative
	16monthsofshehbazspeed	16 months of Shehbaz's speed	Uses performance metrics to legitimise governance
	#خوشحالی_کی_واپسی	Return of prosperity	Frames political change through economic recovery logic
	#پراپیگنڈا_تو_وڑ_گیا	Propaganda has collapsed	Delegitimises opponent narratives through causal explanation
	#سائفر_لیک	Cypher leaked	Uses evidentiary logic to contest opposing claims
Mythopoesis	#شیر_آرہا_ہے	The lion is coming	Constructs narrative of inevitable political return (PML-N symbolism)
	#نوازشریف_سرخرو	Nawaz Sharif vindicated	Builds redemption/vindication narrative around leader
	#امید_پاکستان_نواز_شریف	Nawaz Sharif is Pakistan's hope	Personalises national future in a central heroic figure
	#خوش_آمدید_نوازشریف	Welcome back, Nawaz Sharif	Enacts return-of-the-leader narrative
	#یوم_شیر_21_اکتوبر	21 October: Day of the Lion	Ritualises political resurgence as historic event