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Digital democracy: Social Media and Political Participation

Outlines

i. Introduction

Thesis Statement:

Digital democracy has revolutionized political participation, with social media playing a pivotal role in shaping opinion and mobilizing political movements. While digital democracy offers many benefits, including increased transparency and civic engagement, there are also drawbacks such as risk of misinformation and polarization.

ii. History of social media and its types

iii. Evolution and role of social media

iv. Correlation between social media and democracy

v. Positive impacts of social media on digital democracy

(a) Increasing participation of citizens in decision making.

(b) Dissemination of information among large number of people

- (c) Facilitating direct democracy by increasing transparency and accountability
- (d) Empowering the marginalized groups through social movements
- (e) Developing resistance movements by mobilizing mass protests
- (f) Enhancing citizens' engagement and communication with politicians

vi Negative impacts of social media on digital democracy

- (a) Promoting hate speech and misinformation
- (b) Intensifying surveillance of citizens by authoritarian regimes
- (c) Manipulating outcomes through bots
- (d) Encouraging populism and polarization using echo chambers

vii Digital democracy in Pakistan

viii Conclusion

Digital democracy is an integral part of conventional democracy. Given the rapidly changing democratic landscape as a result of social media, the conventional

democracy also changed into digital democracy. Social media has revolutionized all the segments of the society. It has made communication very easy and fast. In contemporary times, where people have nearly lost their faith in conventional patterns of democracy, social media, the embodiment of visual space, has emerged as a powerful means that enhances democratic engagement and government affairs at grassroots level, influencing the development of digital democracy. It is strengthening democracy by facilitating democratic discourse, improving access to information, and contributing in decision-making process. On the other hand, digital democracy has some shortcomings: increasing misinformation, populism and polarization.

The origin of the social media networking can be found in the 1970s and 1980s, when Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) first appeared. By enabling users to use their modems to connect to a central

central system, BBS provided a platform for file sharing and asynchronous conversation. Friendster and MySpace, the platforms that popularised the idea of online connections and profiles, rose to prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. From their Harvard University dorm room, Mark Zuckerberg and his undergraduate buddies founded Facebook in 2004. It is the most used social media platform across the world. Microblogging was first popularised in 2006 with the launch of Twitter (now X) which enabled users to communicate brief updates in real time with a worldwide audience. Social media networking sites with a strong visual component gained popularity in the 2010s, with Instagram and Snapchat setting the standard. YouTube was introduced in 2005. It is the most important social media platform. It allows people to upload, download and watch videos. Millions of videos are available on YouTube. Following

the outbreak of the COVID-19 digital tools revolutionised the world. As per Pataapost, 5 billion people use social media across the world. Facebook is the most used social media platform more than three billion people use it. Youtube is the second most used social media platform nearly 3 billion people use it. In case of Pakistan, according to PTA 71.7 million people use social media. Youtube is the most used social media platform and Facebook is second.

According to Stephen Downes "Digital democracy is not just about using technology to improve democratic culture process; it's about using technology to empower people to be active and engaged citizens in shaping the future of their society"

Social media has played a significant role in political debate and civic engagement, prospering the digital democracy. In this respect digital democracy provides virtual

space to the modern community to participate in democratic norms effectively.

Evidently, the ^{current} situation of democracy paints a grim picture in many countries. The traditional democracy lacks legitimacy and social ties. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit report "among 167 countries, 116 almost 70 percent recorded decline in their democratic Index score since 2020." The situation has worsened following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, leaving the democracy in state of malaise. The UK based research has shown that people have growing concerns about the effectiveness of governments and democracy. Moreover, the lack of involvement of citizens in policy making has grown public doubts. As a result, people have started seeing new forums for debate and political participation. Undoubtedly, digital democracy has emerged as a silver bullet for the democratic backsliding and betterment of government.

It has not only shifted political communication from the hands of few elite to common citizens but also empowered them to participate in democratic procedures without any barrier. Therefore digital democracy has become essential in the contemporary era of digitalization.

To begin with social media has increased participation of people in decision making processes of government. Through social media and digital platforms, people have greater opportunities to express their opinions and share diverse perspectives regarding policies of government, influencing and affecting political decisions and public policies. Moreover, social media has eliminated the barrier of autocratic regimes that restrict citizens from expressing their opinions and thoughts openly. For instance, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is a social media platform aimed at increasing direct democracy by enabling EU citizens to participate directly in the development

of EU policies. Through these platforms, people express their opinions regarding climate change, elections and other issues, and government formulate policies accordingly. Therefore, social media improves public participation in shaping ~~the~~ policies of government, enhancing their democratic values.

Moreover, social media platforms has provided citizens much better political and government information provision, retrieval and exchange, which is the greatest achievement of digital democracy. Besides, people get information on social media platforms when any government imposes ban on mass media to keep people unaware of their illicit policies or to contain any protest. For instance, during Sudan's 2019 uprising, social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and Facebook) gave people an alternative source of information and an opportunity to organise and rebel against their government. Through social media, people share latest information with large number

of people without any barrier or restriction. As a consequence, social media is an influential tool to keep people updated about their rights and increase their awareness about political situation.

Over and above, social media has enabled citizens to experience direct democracy by enhancing transparency and accountability of government and political representatives. Some countries have initiated many digital processes that allow people to get access to and ~~to~~ information about the expenditure of government initiatives, reforms on ~~several~~ several issues, and changes in sector. For instance, Estonia, a northern European state, is one of the countries that introduced an e-voting, e-licensing, e-services, e-banking and e-commerce at the largest level in democratic process. Through these initiatives, people can participate in online voting and many other services. As a result, people not only save their time and energy but also achieve standard of transp

and efficiency through democratic channels.

In addition, social media platforms have become a medium of social movements where citizens raise their voice against the injustices done to them. In many countries, several groups face discrimination in various forms, including gender discrimination and racial discrimination. Governments remain unable to address their grievances and deprive them of their democratic rights. Through social media, people around the globe show solidarity with others and raise their voices to get justice for these marginalised groups. For instance, social media facilitated the campaign of #BlackLivesMatter in solidarity with a black man George Floyd, who was killed by police in cold blood. Many people raise their voice in support of George Floyd owing to which the police officers were arrested. Therefore, social media is a tool through which marginalised groups secure their

democratic rights.

Apart from the social movements, social media has proved to be a powerful tool to organize revolutionary movements by mobilizing mass protests to turn down the autocratic regimes. In many countries, many tyrannical governments impose strict reforms and suppress citizens, imposing ban on their political activities. However, social media provides a platform to people to vent out their feelings against the governments, policies. Moreover, these masses assemble themselves through social media platform and record their protests. For instance, social media platform were credited with helping in shift power during "Arab Spring", a wave of unrest that first began in Tunisia in December 2010 swept through the Arab region, leading to the overthrow of four Arab heads of state, where power seemed to be shifting from authoritarian regimes to citizens. Therefore social media

has provided a platform for people to overcome the tyranny of governments by enhancing their connectivity.

Last but not least, social media has bridged the gap between citizens and politicians, making it feasible for people to engage with them. In conventional democracy, people remain distanced from politicians to convey their grievances and engage in real time dialogue and discussion with their local administrators, whereas digital democracy has changed the political landscape providing public this opportunity. Moreover, politicians have become more active on social media platforms during elections to disseminate their ideas and share their political programs that they will implement. For instance, according to the report of Twiplomacy 2014, "187 world leaders with 951 accounts - 372 personal and 579 institutional accounts on Twitter. They reach out to ~~reach~~ over 400 million followers." As a consequence, the political participation has increased.

through social media platforms in a way that it paves the way for smooth democratic norms.

Although, there are multiple potential benefits of social media for political participation, it has certain limitations on the flip side, which impede the attainment of true ~~democracy~~ democratic ethos.

First, social media has become the misinformation chamber where people share fabricated news and spread hate speech, leading to serious consequences for decision making processes. It makes people biased against other groups, diffusing hatred among masses. For instance, in UK's EU referendum, some leave supporters used information on social media regarding Islam, where some sections of the leave campaign including UKIP leader Farage, based on a so-called "Muslim invasion" affecting so-called British identity & values. People, especially miscreants, attain their agenda through such tactics, creating differences among people. Therefore social media has

eroded the trust of people in political and democratic processes.

Second, social media has become a spy platform used by autocrats for surveillance of citizens to prevent the emergence of a democracy promotion movement. In several countries, the autocrat rulers strictly control social media to follow the activities of their citizens and keep them in check. When people express their opposing opinions regarding the policies and initiatives of governments or protest against it, the authorities find the person and arrest them. Moreover, such governments censor information and remove content against them. For instance, during the unrest that swept through Iran at the end of 2017, mass surveillance operations on social media significantly aided the authorities' ability to identify, track, arrest and imprison protesters. As a result, people are deprived of the right of freedom of expression, which hampers the democratic growth in the country.

Third, social media has turned

into an instrument for interfering and manipulating the democratic processes through the use of Bots. Various government activities take place on social media platforms, such as e-petitions and e-voting. However, many people and groups manipulate these outcomes through the use of bots, creating fake followers and users, self-interests. For instance, in 2016, CIA claimed Russian involvement in US elections, manipulating the outcomes through the use of Bots. External powers also interfere in such methods to disturb the democratic processes of country. As a consequence, the use of bots not only manipulate the outcomes but also deprives people of their choices.

To top it all, social media has raised the notch of populism and polarization through echo chambers. Echo chambers expose people to information, ideas and knowledge that reinforce ~~and~~ or amplify their existing opinions and perceptions. It causes people to become polarised to certain beliefs and ideas, leading them to extremism.

Many politicians take benefit of the situation and refuse opposing views regarding other parties. For instance Bernie Sanders in the United States and Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom promote divisive narratives of "them versus us", which became common among their followers through echo chambers. As a result, the diversity in democratic norms is lost, and people become biased and intolerant towards other citizens.

In present era where digital democracy is prevailing in many developed and developing countries, Pakistan has also strived to shift towards digital democracy from the conventional democratic norms. In this regard, the government has implemented policies, such as The Road to Digital Pakistan, 2018, to increase connectivity of people with government and attain their democratic rights more efficiently. For instance, in ~~2018~~ 2024 elections, major political parties like PTI used social media platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook, for their campaigns.

to convey their manifesto to the citizens. As 4.5 billion people are users of social media platform like Twitter (now X). However, there are certain impediments for the country to attain real democratic values, such as illiteracy and disparity digital and technological level. To tackle the issues and attain the goal of digital democracy, the government needs to implement its policies, including Digital Pakistan Policy 2021, in true spirit. Therefore, ~~the~~ digital democracy, if prevailed thoroughly, supports the democratic culture in the country, addressing democratic issues at many fronts.

In brief, digital democracy has become the new normal by replacing many traditional democratic processes. Through the social media platform, the political participation has increased not only in developed but also in developing countries as well. The practice of services through social media platforms have strengthened the democratic values

of countries. Nevertheless, there are myriad setbacks of social media, which the progress of democratic practices. If these challenges are addressed timely, countries around the world would become digitally well-equipped states, ensuring transparency and accountability, inclusivity and mass participation.

To sum it up, technology has changed the political landscape in today's digitalized world. Unlike traditional democratic processes, where people remain unaware and distanced from their democratic rights, digital democracy has bridged this chasm and increased their engagement through social media. From e-petition, online discussions, e-voting, and decision making, digital democracy has become integrated in all spheres of government procedures, helping the democracies ~~has become~~ to develop in leaps and bounds. Nevertheless, there are certain shortcomings of social media, such as propagating misinformation

and promoting populism and polarization, which cause democratic backsliding. Moreover, digital democracy is still a far cry in many developing countries, where internet is not accessible to everyone. There, it is essential to utilize technology to strengthen democratic culture and empower citizens. Using social media effectively would lead encourage public participation and flourish democracy by leaps and bounds.