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Decoding Social Media's Role in the Resurgence of the Taliban: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The study assesses the extent to which Taliban 2.0 utilised social media as a political mobilisation strategy and provides a response through discourse analysis and a literature review. The study results indicate that the tactical use of social media was more apparent in 2021 when they were promoting the notion of their impending return to power and advancing their territorial gains on social media. The Taliban 2.0's utilisation of social media underscores their strategies for comprehending public narratives to present themselves as the legitimate authorities of Afghanistan. The research reveals that the Taliban's utilisation of social media tools enabled them to regain control of Afghanistan by shaping public narratives in their favour. The study is unequivocal in its assertion that Taliban 2.0 must evolve into a political institution that is significantly more democratic and responsive. It is sufficient for it to relinquish the dynastic and undemocratic principles upon which it currently operates. Not only to enhance Afghanistan's governance in general but also to allow for a more favourable opportunity to capture the hearts and minds of the Afghan public. The Taliban 2.0 must transcend their identities to alter the ethnic narrative and eliminate inequalities. For the democratic system to progress in the appropriate direction, the nation requires a genuine and democratic opposition party or parties. The Afghan youth are the primary decision-makers in determining whether Afghanistan's democracy will continue to progress towards impactful growth or vice versa, as long as the Afghan public, particularly the youth and strong regional parties, fails to collaborate and present the electorate with viable and credible strategies against misgovernance and economic reforms that generate employment. This study suggests that young Afghans should be encouraged to develop critical thinking skills to use social media to advocate for their rights and convey dissent, as a means of communicating with the current government.

Keywords: *Social Contract, Political Participation, Taliban, Perspectives, Public Perception*

Introduction

Previous endeavours to influence public participation through the use of Internet tools failed to meet expectations. Prior Social Media tools, including online discussion forums, messaging, and surveys, have achieved minimal success (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2009; Vergeer, 2009). Secondly, in addition to political and citizen participation, there are studies that pertain to societal use and social behaviour. For example, the latter's findings endorse the notion that the utilisation of social media platforms enhances social capital, which is associated with political engagement (Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2009; Ellison, 2007; Karahasanović, A., et al. 2009; Tomai, et al., 2010). The Taliban implemented a variety of strategies, such as the strategic utilisation of social media platforms, to shape public narratives and solidify their authority during their two-decade-long resistance. Other strategies included, but were not restricted to, addressing the grievances of the populace in rural areas, sending consistent messages about their determination to retake the country, and portraying themselves as the genuine Islamic warriors (Misra, 2002). The neo-Taliban (Taliban 2.0, Reformed Taliban, or Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), and these terms will be used and employed interchangeably) established a participation ladder with three stages of online participation (Medaglia, 2007; Grönlund, 2009; Sommer and Cullen, 2009). This ladder is beneficial for elucidating the Social Media phenomenon tactics employed by Taliban 2.0. Initially, there is the process of e-enabling. The primary objective is to provide members, citizens, or users with access and information. E-

engagement is the subsequent phase. People have the opportunity to engage with the organisation and initiate a conversation during this phase. For example, forums and polls are utilised to solicit input from individuals regarding specific initiatives, decisions, or activities. E-empowering is the final stage. This phase pertains to collaboration with consumers, members, or citizens. By providing them with responsibilities, duties, and opportunities to collaborate with the organisation, they are empowered. The evidence of this was evident, as the Afghan masses (Pro-Talib) were already employed or residing in the provincial capital cities, anticipating a trigger. On August 15th, individuals (Pro-Talib) emerged from their homes to celebrate and support their victory, thereby demonstrating the e-empowering aspect of the social media ladder.

Extremist groups and individuals employing social media to radicalise for violent extremism pose a hazard that transcends national borders (Almoqbel & Xu, 2019). Taliban 2.0 was able to disseminate their beliefs to a diverse audience as a result of the unregulated dissemination of misinformation on social media. Social media functioned as a propaganda instrument for the general populace, despite its inadequate funding (Nakov & Martino, 2021). Social media platforms enable individuals from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives to express their opinions in an unstructured and open manner. However, they have also facilitated the process of mass radicalisation by extremist organisations (Gallacher et al, 2021; Ul Rehman et al, 2021). Extremist groups exploit individuals' moral intuitions to disseminate their radical and extremist ideologies, as moral intuitions are essential to the definition of human behaviour (Hopp et al., 2021). Young individuals, particularly those aged 15 to 24, who spend a disproportionate amount of time online, are susceptible to radicalisation due to their increased likelihood of encountering bigoted and extremist content online (Costello et al., 2020). "The Taliban is likely the sole armed group to have seized control of an entire nation (for the second time), and they were never a welfare organisation; rather, they had a very narrow and radical perspective on public management" (Harpviken, 2012). The Taliban had a substantial online presence prior to the occurrence of Taliban 2.0, as evidenced by the group's establishment of the "Alemarah" webpage (Johnson et al., 2021). Taylor (2013) observed that Bin Laden himself advocated for the use of media to disseminate anti-West messages to his adherents and other target audiences, such as the youth in Pakistan or other Muslim countries. The Taliban employed social media as a public relations strategy to draw the international public's attention to their military opposition to the foreign forces in Afghanistan after 9/11. Bin Laden once stated, "Media war in this century is one of the strongest methods (of warfare)." The Taliban portrayed themselves as a moderate force that was striving to deliver a sovereign and Islamic Afghanistan to its people, while also referring to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as "invaders" and the Afghan government and security forces as puppets of the international forces in their online communication (Bernatis, 2014). Drissel (2015) further stated that the Taliban employed social media to portray themselves as advocates for Islam, defenders of the Pashtun people, and protectors of Afghans from imperialism and colonisation. The Taliban were able to enhance the robustness of their online propaganda by implementing social media strategies over the years, which proved advantageous on the battlefield (Johnson, 2013). According to one analyst, "Currently, nearly every Taliban fighter possesses a smartphone in their pocket" (Barthwal, 2021). They utilised smartphones to document and subsequently publish their strategic victories on social media platforms, thereby inciting a sense of Political Mobilisation. This concept is not novel; it has been in existence for an extended period of time. Nevertheless, technological advancements and social media have rendered it more pertinent in the present day. Protests, marches, and social media campaigns are among the many manifestations of political mobilisation. It is a method of expressing the requirements and desires of specific groups of individuals and increasing awareness of their concerns. Political mobilisation is instrumental in the promotion of social and political transformation by motivating individuals to engage in action. Before 2001, the Taliban did not have a public relations strategy of any kind. This was evident during the Taliban's initial emergence in 1994. In fact, they thrived on secrecy, and even highly experienced observers found them to be profoundly inscrutable. Nevertheless, they did produce a "foundational mythology" in a relatively short amount of time. At the core of this mythology were young Afghan religious students (Taliban), who were innocent and pure. They were appalled by the corruption and misbehaviour of the Mujahideen organisations that had seized power in 1992 and determined that they had a responsibility to rectify the situation. The students' objective was not to acquire power, but rather to restore morality to Afghan society. Upon completion of this task, they would promptly return to their madrassas (colleges) and resume their studies. According to the narrative, they were warmly received by the populace and ultimately succeeded in gaining control of Kandahar in 1994, Herat in 1995, and the Afghan capital Kabul in 1996. In reality, this mythology contained minimal, if any, truth.

From its inception, the Taliban were primarily a military force that fought their way into Herat and Kabul, as Anthony Davis demonstrated in 1998. The Pakistani interior minister at the time, retired Major-General Naseerullah Babar, was their "godfather." He incited his colleagues in the Pakistan Foreign Ministry by alluding to the Taliban as "our boys." Additionally, Ahmed Rashid, the author, estimated that between 1994 and 1999, approximately "80,000 to 100,000 Pakistanis trained and fought in Afghanistan." Nevertheless, Pakistani officials endeavoured to advance the mythology in public. Despite their lack of comprehension of the new movement, certain Western observers also endorsed it. The Taliban implemented measures to broaden their media presence following their occupation of Kabul in 1996. Their "Voice of Sharia Radio" served as one such outlet for communicating their directives to the Afghan populace. However, it would be difficult to assert that they implemented any form of coherent public relations strategy. They undoubtedly had some immediate political objectives, particularly the acquisition of international recognition. However, they were only able to achieve this to a limited extent, ultimately securing recognition from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The reason was not a subpar public relations strategy, but rather the absence of a marketable product to sell, as the policies they intended to implement, particularly the segregation of Afghan women, were universally unacceptable worldwide. Pakistan, which was the Taliban's primary supporter, attempted to safeguard Taliban interests by employing its diplomats; however, this endeavour accomplished little. There was scarcely a regime in modern history that was as indifferent to the broader world's concerns as the Taliban. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, asserted that the sacred Quran "cannot adjust itself to the requirements of other people; people should adjust themselves to the requirements of the holy Quran." Mullah Hassan, a Taliban official of significant authority who was subsequently appointed as the Taliban regime's "Prime Minister" in 2021, stated, "We are indifferent to the welfare of any individual as long as the religion of Allah is upheld." The Taliban's failure to establish connections with the broader world resulted in their being unable to receive assistance when the September 11, 2001 attacks occurred, even though the al-Qaida perpetrators were being hosted by the Taliban. This defiance was to cost the Taliban dearly. For some time, Pakistan even abandoned them. For several years following the Taliban regime's overthrow, the Taliban were themselves in a state of considerable disarray, dispersed, and impotent, as evidenced by the public relations after 9/11. This impeded their ability to accomplish significant results through a public relations strategy. However, the US invasion of Iraq opened up new opportunities for the Taliban and their supporters in Pakistan, where key Taliban leaders had fled. According to Antonio Giustozzi's 2019 book *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018*, a senior Taliban leader in 2005 stated, "Pakistan removed all the restrictions, and we informed all Taliban members that they do not wish to be arrested; they wish to provide us with support." One area in which Pakistan was well-positioned to support the Taliban was in the field of public relations. Subsequently, the Taliban developed a series of increasingly sophisticated propaganda lines for internal consumption in Afghanistan, which were observed by the International Crisis Group in 2008 and meticulously documented by Thomas H. Johnson in his 2017 book *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. Johnson illustrated that these propaganda lines were rooted in culturally resonant themes, had religious, political, and cultural dimensions, and were contingent upon the perceived sympathetic, unaligned, or unsympathetic nature of the target audiences in Afghanistan. The Taliban also endeavoured to communicate their messages to a broader audience as time progressed, even though their capacity to do so was substantially limited by the ongoing sanctions regimes. This, however, underwent a significant transformation in 2018 when the United States initiated negotiations with the Taliban. Subsequently, Taliban propaganda increasingly targeted Western-privileged audiences. In the post-2001 era, Taliban public relations employed a broader array of strategies than one might have anticipated. Among these were magazines and hardcopy publications, "night letters" (texts that were posted or circulated surreptitiously and frequently contained warnings or threats), and a propagandistic "code of conduct" that purportedly compelled Taliban combatants to adhere to a set of rules in the context of armed conflict. However, in addition to these areas, the Taliban actively engaged in the rapidly changing field of electronic communications. One outlet was provided by mobile radio stations that broadcast in Pushto and Dari, as Johnson's research has demonstrated. Mehran, Al Bayati, Mottet, and Lemieux have also observed the Taliban's highly sophisticated use of videos, which differ depending on the strategic theme, and employ multimodal and cinematographic techniques, as well as the use of noises and visual modes. The Taliban's online presence was of even greater significance, as it capitalised on opportunities to communicate with audiences beyond Afghanistan. However, the eventual proliferation of internet connectivity as Afghans of all ages acquired mobile phones also expanded the Taliban's propaganda reach within Afghanistan. Access to these latter social media platforms was likely facilitated by the United States and its allies' failure to officially designate the Taliban as a terrorist entity.

Outlets included the website Alemarah, a Facebook book, and a variety of Twitter accounts. This utilisation of the internet was not a trivial endeavour. In his 2016 book, *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*, Neil Krishan Aggarwal contended that the Taliban successfully utilised the internet to transform individual and community identities by employing deliberate methods of self-presentation, social positioning, and relating to others that recognise and reflect cultural change. However, it would be an error to presume that the Taliban's success was primarily due to public relations and propaganda. Rather, its objectives were accomplished as a result of its unwavering military assaults. Before the majority of Western forces were withdrawn by the end of 2014, these attacks not only targeted the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police but also the Afghan National Army. The Taliban was responsible for 66% of the 39,039 war-related civilian fatalities in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2019, according to the United Nations. Additionally, Afghan civilian casualties were substantial. There is some evidence that the public's response to the deaths caused by the Taliban was less intense than that to those caused by international forces. However, there is little evidence to suggest that this asymmetry was the result of Taliban public relations efforts, rather than individuals' direct experiences and broad senses of identity. The apparent intractable nature of the conflict ultimately led Western powers, particularly the United States, to seek a method of exiting Afghanistan. Taliban public relations were instrumental in convincing certain key Western players that the Taliban had "moderated" and could, therefore, serve as potential partners in a diplomatic process to expedite the US's departure. Therefore, the Taliban needed to establish themselves as actors who could be relied upon to uphold their commitments to the letter and spirit of their promises, negotiate in good faith, and respect human rights and freedom. The conclusion of this procedure was the article published by Sirajuddin Haqqani in February 2020. The critical target in this case was not the mass public, but rather US President Trump and his advisors, as well as opinion leaders in Western countries who may advocate for a "peace process." This image was projected during meetings in Doha that were attended by Taliban figures and the contentious US Special Representative Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad. Regrettably, it was welcomed by a receptive audience in both policy and academic circles. The consequences were calamitous, as it became increasingly apparent: a peace process that was a farce, a US disengagement agreement that was profoundly defective and hazardous, and an increase in violence. Those who had been swayed by the Taliban's propaganda, similar to those who purchased a counterfeit Rembrandt, were sluggish to acknowledge the error. As a consequence, the development of "fantasy castles of research, advocacy, and new institutions" was a consequence, as Kate Clark of the reputable Afghanistan Analysts Network put it. However, when the time came for a crisis, Haqqani's reassuring words were rendered meaningless.

The Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, as the new US President, Biden, disregarded the expert advice of a bipartisan, congressionally-mandated study group to re-set course. This was an extraordinary accomplishment for a "multinational criminal cartel," as one seasoned observer has described it. The discussion that preceded it indicates that the consequences of Taliban propaganda have been decidedly inconsistent. When examining propaganda, it is important to exercise caution and avoid the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy, as well as the simple assumption of cause and effect. Although the Taliban's endeavours may have been successful in motivating their combatants, there are still significant questions regarding the factors that motivated various Taliban foot soldiers to fight and the extent to which Pakistan played a role in the Taliban's ultimate success. Evidence suggests that Pakistan played a more significant role than initially reported. Although it may have been more a matter of informing the audience something it was already anxious to hear, the Taliban's success in convincing Western policymakers and observers that the earlier Taliban had been succeeded by a "Taliban 2.0" was also quite an achievement. Additionally, there is evidence that the Taliban's social media campaigns were highly effective in eroding the morale of the Afghan population following the US-Taliban agreement. However, their effectiveness in garnering a broader base of support is a different matter. The Asia Foundation's survey, which historian Carter Malkasian has referred to as "the most respected survey of the Afghan people," provides little evidence that Taliban propaganda regarding the presence of foreign forces gained significant momentum among the general Afghan populace. In the 2019 survey, the most recent comprehensive survey conducted prior to the onset of COVID-19, 85.1% of respondents expressed no sympathy for the Taliban. Of those who believed that the country was headed in the incorrect direction, only 6.6% attributed it to foreign intervention. Additionally, 47% of Afghans who did express some sympathy for the Taliban did so solely because the Taliban were Afghan, while only 2% did so because "they fight against foreign forces." This implies that the Taliban may instead employ coercion in order to exercise power, as they are unlikely to be able to rely on generalised normative support, which is to say, legitimacy. It remains to be determined

whether they could mobilise an adequate coercive capacity to endure in the event of a general insurrection; however, it is imperative that they do not assume this. The Taliban 2.0 (Post 2021) employed social media to strengthen the narrative of their control over various regions in the country by supplying content from their ground activities. Before Taliban 2.0, the organisation was capable of maintaining its influence in a variety of regions of the country by employing a variety of strategies. One such strategy was to address the grievances of rural communities that were disregarded by the country's fragile governance and judicial systems (Mehran et al., 2022). In order to address the grievances of rural communities, the Taliban implemented their own form of immediate justice to resolve local disputes or conflicts. Additionally, they employed social media posts to recruit youth, raise funds, and expand their ideology. The Taliban were able to manipulate public narratives and shape people's perceptions by presenting their preferred image of community activism and welfare through the use of social media (Farrell, 2018). Despite the Taliban's limited resources in comparison to the former Afghan government, they were more adept at utilising social media to disseminate information that promoted their political agenda (Ibrahimi et al., 2015). Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's spokesperson, was publishing over 15 tweets per day prior to the creation of Taliban 2.0, which is indicative of their level of social media activity. The Taliban employed Facebook and X to publish statements that reiterated their dedication to the Afghans' "freedom" and to report their attacks on security forces (Bahar, 2020). The Taliban have employed social media in a manner that is both personalised and targeted. Before Taliban 2.0, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's spokesperson, personally responded to enquiries and enquiries posted on individuals' social media accounts. For instance, in response to an inquiry regarding the Taliban's governance style, he stated, "These regulations are not imposed by us; they are derived from God, and we are obligated to adhere to them" (Hasrat-Nazimi, 2012). Bahar (2020) observed that the Taliban's Twitter account, which was established in 2011 and is managed by their spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, posts over 15 tweets per day. The four primary themes of the Taliban's narrative on social media are "their national sovereignty over the Afghan soil," "the military strength of their ranks," "the sacredness of the Taliban's jihad," and "the authority of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate" (EFSAS, 2020). The Taliban employed social media and other online platforms, including radio, during their twenty-year conflict, in contrast to their previous regime in the 1990s (Ruttig, 2021). Although the Taliban prohibited the use of the Internet during their previous regime, they significantly depended on Internet communication, including social media platforms, after losing control of Afghanistan in 2001. Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2022) contended that the "Taliban of 2021 are distinct from the Taliban of 1996, at least in terms of their media messaging, propaganda, and political manoeuvring." The Taliban continued to post videos on the internet, including on social media, to maintain their visibility and to communicate with their members to renew their commitment to continuous fighting (Bodetti, 2016). Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the web editor of a Taliban website, once stated that "wars today cannot be won without media." The media's objective is to target the heart rather than the body, and the battle is gained if the heart is defeated (Gawakh, 2011). Courchesne et al. (2022) stated that the Taliban employed five distinct narratives through X while retaking control of Afghanistan: (1) projecting the Taliban as a government-in-waiting; (2) promoting the military victories of the Taliban; (3) delegitimising the republic government; (4) exaggerating the civilian deaths caused by republic government and foreign forces; (5) reporting the defections from the Afghan military; and (6) publicising the Taliban leadership's relations with foreign governments. This form of media was used for propaganda. They have evolved their strategy for winning the media conflict over time (Hasrat-Nazimi, 2012). According to one analyst, "Insurgents have consistently desired to present themselves as victorious." The internet has significantly simplified the process. The Taliban were active on Twitter and were tweeting continuously (Michaels, 2012). A hyperlink to the Taliban's official website was included in the official Taliban account, @alemarahweb. The group was also able to communicate and collaborate through the messaging features of various social media platforms, including Messenger and WhatsApp. The primary argument of the Taliban's social media activity, according to Corsello (2022), was that "the (former) government was illegitimate." The social media platform was utilised to facilitate communication with distant audiences. They published content in a variety of languages, such as Arabic, English, Pashto, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. They utilised Telegram, Twitter, and a WhatsApp chatroom that was frequently updated throughout the day and contained mobile numbers from Afghanistan, the Emirates, Iran, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Qari Muhammad Yousaf Ahmadi, the Taliban's former spokesperson, once stated, "Given the realities on the ground, social media allow us to contact foreign and local journalists easily." He also stated, "I use computers and have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (for winning over the minds and hearts of the masses" (Bodetti, 2016).

Taylor (2019) observed that the Taliban utilised social media to facilitate their ground operations in Afghanistan, including propaganda development, narrative manipulation, and the acquisition or maintenance of local support. After the United States declared the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan on April 14, 2021, the Taliban further escalated their use of social media to publicise their territorial gains in Taliban 2.0. On August 15, 2021, Taliban 2.0 seized the capital of Kabul after beginning their operations in rural areas and progressing to the district headquarters, provincial capitals, and critical transportation routes. Karimi and Faiez (2021) posit that Taliban social media endeavoured to prepare the way by altering Afghan public narratives in response to the concern of an additional Taliban regime. It also eroded the confidence and morale of former Afghan forces, thereby discouraging them from retaliating against the Taliban. The Taliban employed social media on numerous occasions to urge the former Afghan forces to surrender. They disseminated photographs and videos depicting the Taliban accepting or surrendering weapons to certain personnel (Nossiter & Abed, 2021). The Taliban posted videos and photos of themselves "exercising hard, eating ice cream, and looking terrific" when they entered Kabul (Corsello, 2022, p. 52). On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured Zaranj, the provincial capital of Nimroz province (Akhgar & Gannon, 2021). The Taliban have posted photos and videos on social media, depicting their soldiers posing for photos and photographs at the city's entrance and inside the airport and government structures, although the former government initially denied this news (Makoi, 2021).. Social media was awash with unverified videos of Taliban fighters liberating prisoners from government prisons and accelerating on motorcycles towards district capitals (D'Agata, 2021; Karimi & Faiez, 2021). The dread of the Taliban retaking the country shortly was exacerbated by the unrestricted content on social media (Noorzai, 2021). The perception of the Taliban as the country's inevitable future power was further bolstered by the Taliban's narratives of being the "good guy" and winning the war (Sofuoglu, 2021). The Taliban's social media messaging assumed a more amicable tone in mid-2021, as they reaped territorial gains. Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's spokesperson, had over 350,000 followers at that time. Rita Katz, executive director of SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors online extremism, stated that the Taliban of today are exceedingly sophisticated about technology and social media, and they are not comparable to the Taliban of two decades ago (Corsello, 2022). The Taliban implemented sophisticated social media strategies to establish local narratives that were favourable to them. Lee et al. (2022) conducted a sentiment analysis of tweets immediately following the Taliban 2.0 event and discovered that the majority of the five analyses from the East-West Centre regarding Afghan-originated tweets did not express any astonishment regarding the Taliban's retaking of their country.

Do Afghans need a Whistle Blow: Mobilization or Polarization or a new kind of mobilization

Citizens' ways of participating in civic and political life seem to be ever-changing. Digital media have expanded our political repertoires with new modes of action such as using protest hashtags or joining online groups involved in political issues. In this regard, Bennett and Segerberg introduced the concept of connective action. According to the authors, taking public action has increasingly become an act of personal expression. Hereby, a new logic of participation has emerged where 'sharing' is the starting point of political participation, enabled by various personal communication technologies such as social media (Wani, N. U. H., & Kabir, H. (2016).

Given these changing contexts, some authors have argued that it has become necessary to update our notions of what exactly constitutes political participation. One of the most frequently cited definitions of political participation is that of Verba and Nie (2009): "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take". A broader understanding of the concept is found in the work of Verba, Scholzman & Brady (2006). Here, political participation is considered a way to express your voice, to or the consequence of affecting, directly or indirectly, government action.

Norris [8]; in turn, expands the concept, as political participation might also include those activities which attempt to alter systematic patterns of behaviour. However, the lines between political participation and other related concepts, such as civic participation, have become blurred [9], and many authors have called for conceptual clarification (e.g. Wani, N. U. H., Dhimi, J. K., & Rehman, A. U. (2016). As a way to conceptualize the social and political mobilization of personal networks through digital technologies, Theocharis introduced the concept of digitally networked participation (DNP). DNP is defined as "a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their mobilization and

activate their social networks to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of a social or political problem”. Forms of DNP include for example tweeting with specific hashtags to display mobilization or encouraging others to act on an issue through a social networking site (SNS).

While online participatory acts have been empirically shown to be standalone forms of engaging with politics to date no comprehensive and validated instrument exists to capture this diverse set of behaviours through social media. Moreover, extant literature has pointed to the relevance and conceptual distinctiveness of both expressive forms of online political action, as well as more latent, cognitive, forms of political participation (‘political lurking’ such as seeking out political pages on social media).

Therefore, drawing from a growing body of literature, this paper focuses on political participation as both active, expressive forms of political action through social media, as well as cognitive political participation (e.g. sharing posts versus information seeking and acquiring). Hereby, we build on the concept of digitally networked participation as proposed by Theocharis; while adding to the literature by including a cognitive form of individual participation through social media. Thus, this section aims to test the psychometric properties of a new instrument, called the ‘Social Media Political Participation Scale’ post-Aug 2021 in Afghanistan, that captures the complexity of political participation through social media platforms. More specifically, the scale was validated using a high school youth sample. More than any other social group, much scholarly attention has gone to the political self-expression of youth and how it relates to internet and social media use.

Within studies concerning political participation, youth are often disregarded as being apathetic to politics and disengaged. However, young people are among the most frequent users of social media platforms and seem to be more likely to use social networking sites for political participatory actions. Therefore, it might be possible that youth are engaging in politics through ‘alternative voicing routes’ on social media, that are often not captured in research through existing measures.

The scale was developed to fit the platform affordances of Facebook. Facebook remains one of the most used social networking sites to date. In the country where this study was performed, Facebook is the biggest social media platform in terms of active users. More specifically, 66% of 16- to 18-year-olds use Facebook at least once a week. Facebook constitutes a central platform for political expression and participation for several reasons. First, it provides an important way for accessing political news and information and gaining knowledge on current events, often referred to as cognitive political social media use [33,34]. Furthermore, shaped by its technical and social affordances, it provides a unique space for political participation, by allowing to creation of events, closed groups, posts and pages [35,36]. Groups specifically have been found to possess an important networking functionality which fosters political participation [37]. In addition, Facebook offers many ways to express political identity, for example by adding so-called Facebook Frames on profile pictures, adding political affiliations on one’s ‘bio’ and the interactive nature of the Facebook news feed. Some authors have even suggested that the affordances of Facebook might be more suitable for stimulating collective action than other SNS platforms due to its focus on strong-tie networks. Based on these arguments from the literature, Facebook was chosen for this study, as it offers a wide array of possibilities to participate politically. As such, the platform fits the study’s aim to construct a complex and nuanced measure of political participation on SNS.

From a practical viewpoint, the Social Media Political Participation Scale can be implemented in future studies and survey research to explore the different ways in which people employ social media to inform and express themselves and possibly influence others (both citizens and government) on political and social issues. First, the scale allows researchers to gain insight into who is politically engaged through social media, and why, by comparing different social groups and exploring possible predictors of these behaviours. For example, following the advice of Hooghe and Marien, the scale could be used to study how political trust and scepticism impact different forms of political participation through social media. Second, a validated measure of political participation through social media might elevate existing studies towards citizens’ political repertoires, by capturing a more diverse set of behaviours. Third, as a validated scale, it allows for modification to study specific social and political issues. Also, future research might apply the scale to other social media platforms, to assess its validity.

Finally, it is necessary to put in perspective the role of the citizens in the mobilization processes. As we have seen, elites and institutions have a big influence on the direction of democracy. They can influence citizens and structure their preferences, their feelings of solidarity, their interpretation of reality, etc. However, first, not all citizens are affected in the same way by the same information or incentive structures. Second, the reverse order of causation is relevant – elites and institutions are often shaped by the pressure from beneath in the form of

the will and methods of expression of the people. When these take an anti-democratic course, terms such as ‘mob’ and ‘rabble’ are heard. When they take a democratic or other more sympathetic course, they are usually called grassroots movements. But even if the citizens are motivated by widely differing aims, it is possible to ask whether the underlying dynamics in political processes are not similar. This question is well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is worthwhile to provide some illustrations of how the characteristics of individuals shape political movements and what may constitute differences that are very important to democratic development.

There is no shortage of studies supporting the liberal democracy theory we mentioned at the beginning – stating that not only enlightened elites but also educated and socially oriented citizens are necessary for a functioning democracy. A generally high level of education and high levels of social capital among the population are seen as either essential or at least conducive to a functioning democracy. A recent report by the Asia Foundation cites corruption—next to security and poverty—as one of the three issues Afghans are most concerned about. A recent example of corruption can be found in the transportation of timber in Kunar. According to a member of the Lower House of Afghanistan’s parliament, who did not want his name to be disclosed, the Afghan Ministry of Finance has estimated that the revenue generated from the transportation of timber from Kunar to be over 2,000 million Afghanis (USD 50 million), but after the timber was taken away the Kunar provincial government says that they collected just 480 million Afghanis from it. The problem in the Kunar timber industry is just one of the many examples of widespread corruption in the country.

Most Afghans see the direct impact of corruption in their daily lives. We have to pay bribes to government officials for minor services, such as getting a national identity card. Provincial officials use their political influence to obtain shares in the development projects that are implemented in their province. Nepotism and political corruption have increased to drastic levels. The central Afghan government is not only callous to this, but its complicity is apparent. Meanwhile, provincial officials are becoming increasingly despotic as they compete with one another for more of the spoils. They act as if they are not accountable to the people, the Constitution or a system of law. Unfortunately, they are right. There is no manner for the population to hold the government to account. In cases of extreme pressure, the central government sends a delegation to evaluate an issue in a province. The delegation goes to the province, spends its time with the corrupt official, and returns with gifts and pockets full of cash. Thousands of such commissions and delegations were made by the Afghan government in the last decade, but they have not shown any positive results.

Ordinary Afghans feel helpless. We feel stuck with this government, and we feel that international intervention is necessary to make it any different. We are so tired of these paradoxes of conflict that we can only think about our lives at this moment, today. Tomorrow is too far, as if beyond the next mountain. This ethos of survival has made our people passive, and even numb, towards these abuses. Meanwhile, the Afghan government has done little to win the hearts and minds of its people. It seems that politicians either do not want to act against corrupt officials, because they benefit from the graft, or they are incapable of acting against them because they are politically so weak. The level of foreign assistance and the careless involvement of the international community generally exacerbate this problem. If the international community intends to achieve the goal of stability by representative democracy, then it needs to start helping Afghan civil society mobilize itself against corruption. Civil society should be encouraged to exercise nonviolent civic mobilization on the local level against corrupt officials.

Some of the tactics of nonviolent civic mobilization, such as protests and boycotts, have already been used in Afghanistan against the government and other entities. Even the Afghan Mujahideen, while fighting against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, created a parallel government in Peshawar as a tactic of nonviolent civic mobilization. Further, Afghan culture has some institutions—like the Jirga, a consensus-based tribal assembly—that can be used for mobilizing against corruption.

However, our civil society is not yet well-organized in a way that cuts across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. It lacks the knowledge and experience to launch strong civic mobilization campaigns. A low level of organization in such campaigns can make them easy to hijack by politicians or insurgents. Nonviolent civic mobilization campaigns are necessary for bringing Afghans from passivity to activity. If people are empowered, then they can affect change in their society. Changing people’s mentality to think that this is even possible, however, is the first and most important step in empowerment. It is a long process and should not be expected to take place overnight.

People must be first educated, disciplined in thought and then mobilized for change. Citizens of Afghanistan must be taught nonviolent conflict as a means of struggle, especially through its roots in Islamic tradition. Afghan civil society throughout the country must convey the message that people have a right to employ nonviolent struggle to make a difference in their lives. Part of the problem, too, is that Afghan security forces, particularly the police, lack a culture of tolerance. They do not recognize that ordinary citizens have a right to participate in peaceful demonstrations and protests. The Afghan security forces need to be educated in nonviolent civic mobilization and other related legal issues so they do not continue to needlessly suppress peaceful protestors and violate the basic civil rights of others. Youth across Afghanistan, particularly in big metropolitan centres, have realized the need for nonviolent mobilization. They are mobilizing. Almost every week, we read that youth and university students are taking action to bring change to their country. Volunteer non-political associations have been established, Facebook groups have been created, and youth are organizing against the status quo of conflict and corruption. The Arab Spring has shown the world that Muslims can ably employ methods of nonviolence and democracy. Many Afghan youth would like to follow suit, but they lack guidance and direction for implementing such campaigns. They lack expertise in organizing across ethnic groups and mobilizing the whole population. They do not know where to begin or how to begin. They need experience and leadership. At this crucial stage, the lines of President Ronald Reagan: "Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means." And at this stage, the Taliban 2.0 job is to find those means. Once Afghans understand that they are empowered, they will find ways to eradicate corruption and struggle nonviolently against ineffective officials in their localities. This will help strengthen governance, bringing Afghans closer to a more legitimate democratic government than the international community ever could.

The Responsibility of the Political Elite(Taliban 2.0)

When their political campaigns are effective from a democratic perspective, political leaders worldwide are rarely opposed to claiming personal credit. This perspective is evident in the portrayal of political leaders as the progenitors of the nation in portraits and statues, as well as the composition of biographies of the "great leaders." The responsibility of individual leaders is rarely acknowledged when events go awry, at least not by themselves. Suddenly, it is imperative to comprehend "structures," including the economic situation, the constitution, and the laws.

It is evident that political leaders can be compelled to adopt positions and strategies that polarise groups in an anti-democratic direction by institutions, conventions, implicit and written systems of rules, and so forth. After experiencing severe restrictions on freedom and harassment for an extended period, it is challenging to assign responsibility to a party that resorts to violence. It is possible to observe components of this process in Panjshir. Simultaneously, it is incorrect to absolve political leaders of responsibility in every instance that results in conflict. It is possible that the authorities could have acted differently. It is possible that they could have implemented conciliatory strategies in critical situations. In addition to instances that are challenging to evaluate from a responsibility standpoint, there are numerous instances of conflict that have been incited by politicians whose primary objective has been to increase their power and influence. Subsequently, conflict may emerge as an unexpected outcome. Polarisation may occasionally be a manifestation of a desire for retribution or an intention to eliminate or displace another group within the community. The patterns of mobilisation that may emerge among the population are undoubtedly influenced by the political elites. This is somewhat accurate. In the event that society is composed of numerous politicians and groups, each of which is consistently expressing political demands of varying natures, a pattern of countervailing pressures emerges that prevents any one group from gaining complete control. In situations such as this, the Taliban 2.0 has revoked the registration of all 69 political parties that were listed.

Lastly, it is imperative to consider the role of citizens in the mobilisation processes. As we have observed, the orientation of democracy is significantly influenced by elites and institutions. They have the ability to shape the preferences, sentiments of solidarity, and interpretation of reality of citizens. However, it is important to note that the information or incentive structures that are implemented do not necessarily have the same impact on all citizens. Secondly, the reverse order of causation is pertinent; elites and institutions are frequently influenced by the will and methods of expression of the populace. Term such as "mob" and "rabble" are employed when these take an anti-democratic turn. Typically, grassroots movements are referred to as such when they adopt a democratic or other more empathetic stance. However, it is feasible to enquire whether the fundamental dynamics of political processes are not comparable, even if the citizens are driven by widely dissimilar objectives. This inquiry is significantly beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is essential to offer a

few examples of how the characteristics of individuals can influence political movements and what types of differences are crucial for the development of Democratic societies.

The following enquiries are reasonable in light of the challenges described in this study:

Is Afghan democracy regarded as sustainable? Is there an adequate number of middle-class, literate, female, and low-caste individuals in politics, as well as an average income that is sufficiently high to support liberal values? Occasionally, researchers and debaters reframe the issue and enquire as to whether Afghanistan's de-facto democracy establishes the appropriate conditions for long-term development. When will Afghanistan be able to establish a form of fundamental welfare for all of its citizens? Is it possible for democracy to simultaneously promote economic development, political stability, and justice? The issue is inadvertently raised during the discussion of these questions:

Is Afghan democracy itself creating the preconditions for its long-term survival

Is the Afghan democracy itself establishing the necessary conditions for its long-term survival? In one respect, Afghanistan has challenged numerous conventional notions of what constitutes favourable conditions for a democratic government. The country has achieved an extraordinary level of voter mobilisation, even though it has faced numerous administrative failures, low literacy, and poverty. Currently, there is a lack of widespread support for the notion that citizens have the right to select their leaders in Afghanistan. But the steering ambition was disrupted by the Doha agreement, the resurgence of Taliban 2.0, the departure of NATO and US forces, and the evacuation of Ashraf Gani. In this context, it is imperative to emphasise three factors that contribute to this impact on democracy. The initial point is that the provision of government services is not always quantifiable in terms of expenditure levels. In order to comprehend the function of the government and various institutions in the emergence or prevention of conflicts, it is necessary to observe the manner in which services are delivered. Are government services and provisions equitable, efficient, clientelist, complex, etc.? Conflict is exacerbated by an inadequate state apparatus. Gunnar Myrdal emphasised the critical role of the government's character in development in Asian Drama, and subsequent experts in development and administration have echoed this sentiment.

In this context, the term "soft" is used to describe the state apparatuses that are dysfunctional in the developing world due to corruption and clientelism. The American Constitution's writers, particularly James Madison, were the first to explicitly express the notion that institutions play a role in the formation of a society and the degree of political tolerance among its citizens. Madison was instrumental in the development of the American Declaration of Rights and ensured that the US Constitution included the principles of "checks and balances." The second factor is the influence of the political leadership, who are instrumental in determining whether individuals are mobilised under populist and intolerant banners. Political leaders are not only "structural dopes," who are actors whose actions are solely determined by socioeconomic and cultural conditions, institutions, norms, and rules, but also actors who can function autonomously. They have the option to employ confrontational strategies and mobilise for short-term economic gain. Alternatively, they may opt to develop sustainable economic strategies and rely on political strategies that lubricate the troubled waters of pluralistic and infected societies.

The third factor is the individuals themselves. They may be well-traveled, prosperous, educated, and knowledgeable about political processes. In contrast to individuals who have never had direct contact with other political groupings or cultures and are inadequately educated and indigent, these citizens are likely to exhibit a greater degree of tolerance towards members of society who behave differently and express divergent opinions.

It is crucial to comprehend the three factors mentioned above in order to comprehend the reasons why the Taliban 2.0's political mobilisation facilitated their revival. If left unchecked, these factors could also work against the revival. This article is not intended to incite dread regarding what was previously referred to as "political mass participation"—a term that was also used during the democracy debate. In order to prevent the situation from spiralling out of control, the populace's level of education must be increased, and they must be socialised to the democratic norms of the game by engaging in politics. One of the most contentious topics in the social sciences is the correlation between democracy and desirable societal development. Afghanistan frequently appears in this discourse due to the existence of instances that challenge conventional beliefs. For instance, the school of modernisation, which is predicated on the notion that economic expansion is an indispensable prerequisite for democracy, may be referenced. Barrington Moore advanced this perspective, which translated into an unfavourable assessment of Afghanistan's prospects subsequent to Taliban 2.0. It is accurate that the Afghan economy has not performed well since August 2021.

The social compact in Afghanistan was significantly impeded by a feeble economy, low literacy levels, and the exceedingly disparate distribution of the few available resources. In what ways has Afghanistan's de-facto government been able to foster a type of development that is desirable in other respects? The country's stability and ethnic harmony are most frequently attributed to democracy, which is a positive aspect. The reformed Taliban 2.0 must comprehend and learn how to maintain unity and manage their affairs. In this context, it is imperative to emphasise three factors that contribute to this impact on democracy. The initial point is that the provision of government services is not always quantifiable in terms of expenditure levels. To comprehend the function of the government and various institutions in the emergence or prevention of conflicts, it is necessary to observe how services are delivered. Are government services and provisions equitable, efficient, clientelist, complex, etc.? Conflict is exacerbated by an inadequate state apparatus.

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In this context, the process of facilitating the lost social compact is ambiguous, resulting in a vacuum. If women are not incorporated into the process, the environment is not conducive to the rapid establishment of a contract between the government and society. The social contract analysis is a valuable tool for determining the benefits and expectations of citizens under various regimes, including authoritarian and democratic systems. This process also underscores the significance and influence of women in the political sphere. President Ronald Reagan's statement, "Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means," is particularly relevant at this critical juncture. At this juncture, the Taliban 2.0's responsibility is to identify those methods. Afghans will discover methods to eradicate corruption and engage in nonviolent resistance against ineffective officials in their communities once they comprehend that they are empowered. This will contribute to the enhancement of governance, thereby moving the Afghan people closer to a democratic government that is more legitimate than any that the international community has ever seen.

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