

Pakistan in 2021 - An Analysis of National Narratives on Twitter

January 2022

Copyright © 2022 G5iO.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.

G5 Internet Observatory
team@g5io.org

Office 505, 5th Floor, Evacuee Trust Complex, Sir Agha Khan Road,
F-5/1, Islamabad, Pakistan

www.g5io.org

Pakistan in 2021 - An Analysis of National Narratives on Twitter

Overview:

The last two decades have seen an exponential growth in the digital landscape, revolutionizing the way people communicate and share ideas online. Twitter, while leading this change, has transformed discourse across the social media sphere with trending topics encapsulating a powerful and unique way to promote conversations around key issues and events. In essence, representing not only when and what something holds mass appeal but also how fervently its discussed and engaged with by users online.

Taking a detailed look at the top trends that featured on the Pakistan trends panel throughout the year, G5iO as part of its annual study undertook an in-depth discourse analysis of the country's Twitter sphere. We looked at not only what kinds of topics held the most appeal across the majority of Pakistani social media users, but also what kind of sub-topics received the most attention throughout the year.

Our findings revealed that while politics related trends remained the most popular across the year, there was an interesting mix of diverse topics ranging from the benign (such as sports) to those with serious implications (such as governance and policy challenges).

Methodology:

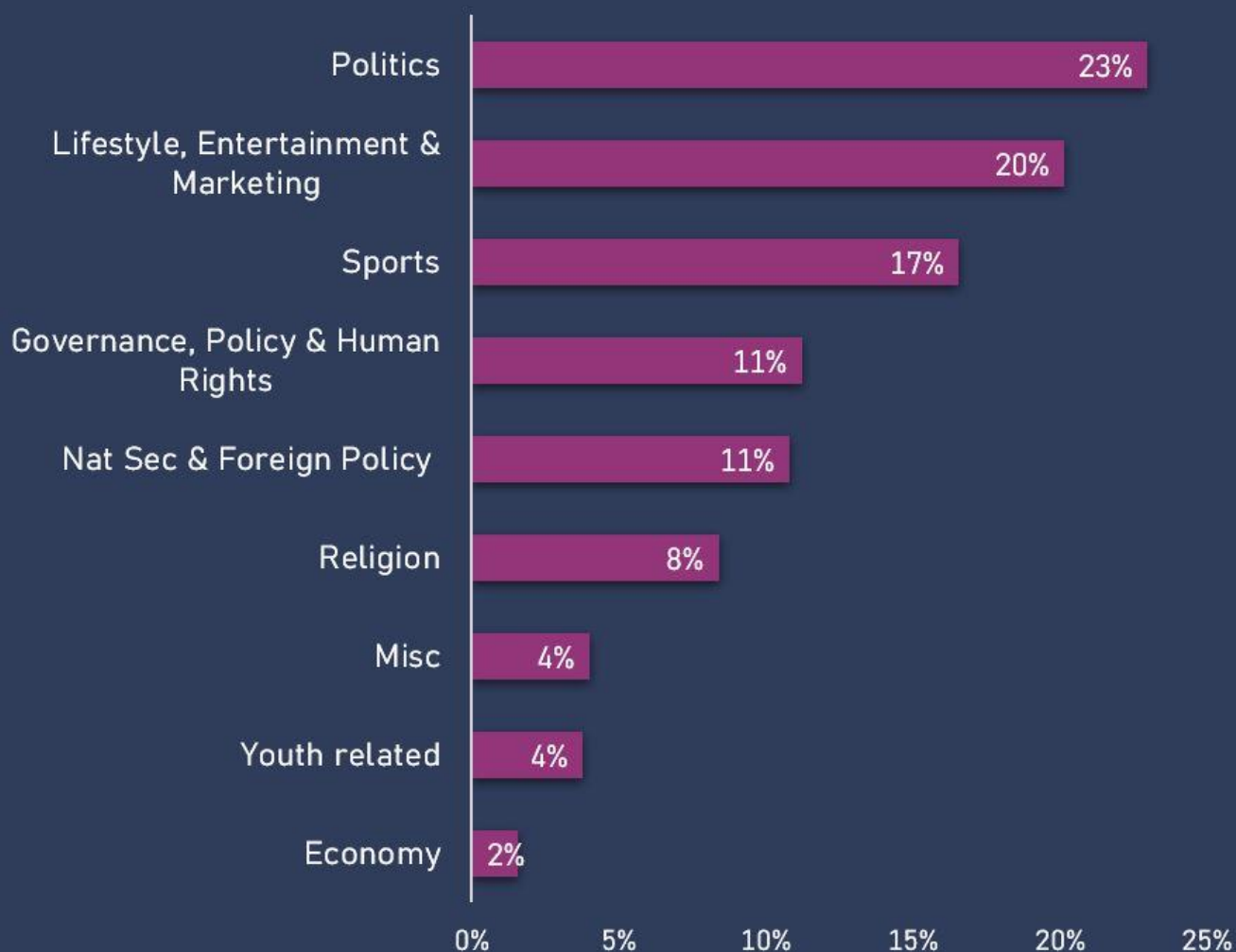
To get a comprehensive look at Twitter trends throughout the year, we took a sample of the top 5 hashtags on the Pakistan Twitter panel every 4 hours from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021.

After excluding keywords or phrases without the Hashtag (#) symbol, our primary dataset comprised of 9611 hashtags. These were then coded into different categories based on a rigorous discourse analysis of both the overall context and deeper underlying subtext, such as Politics, Lifestyle & Marketing, Sports, National Security etc.

Top Trends by Category:

Drawing on our primary data set, we saw that out of all topics to have trended throughout the year, Politics comprised of almost a quarter of our entire sample. This was closely followed by lifestyle/entertainment related trends at 20% and Sports at 17%. Surprisingly, hashtags related to key issues such as the Economy trended the least, amounting to only 2% of the total hashtags analyzed.

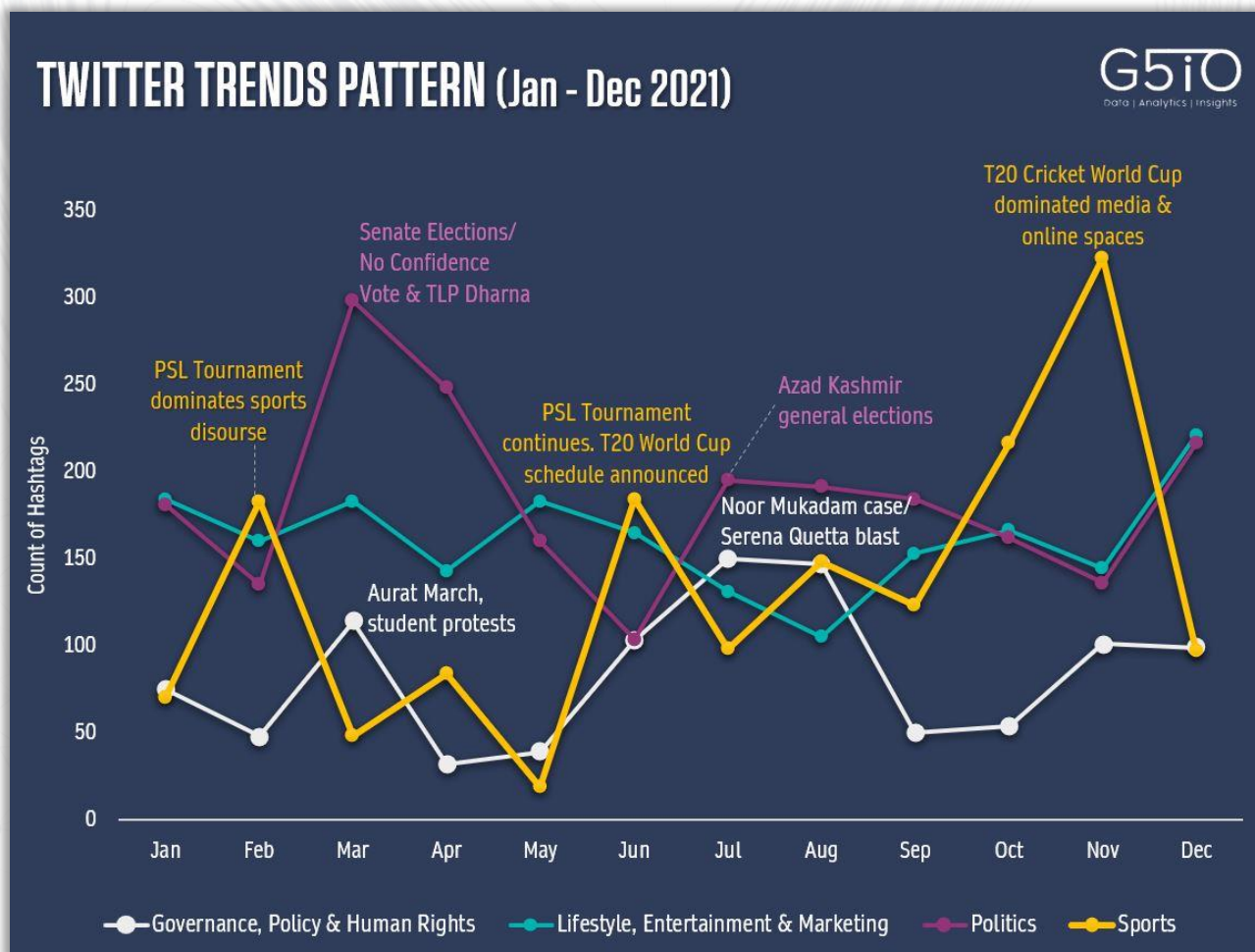
TOP TWITTER TRENDS IN PAKISTAN BY CATEGORY (2021)

G5iO
data | Analytics | Insights

Cyclical Pattern of Twitter Trends:

Adding a bit of dynamism to the more static representation above, we wanted to see how the above categories flowed in comparison to one another over the course of the year, and we noticed were some interesting patterns. For instance, lifestyle and entertainment-related hashtags showed a consistent pattern throughout the year representing a stream of marketing campaigns and recurring hashtags such as #JummahMubarak, #GoodMorning, etc. On the other hand, politics related hashtags exhibited an almost cyclical pattern related to key events such as the Senate elections and the general elections in Azad Kashmir.

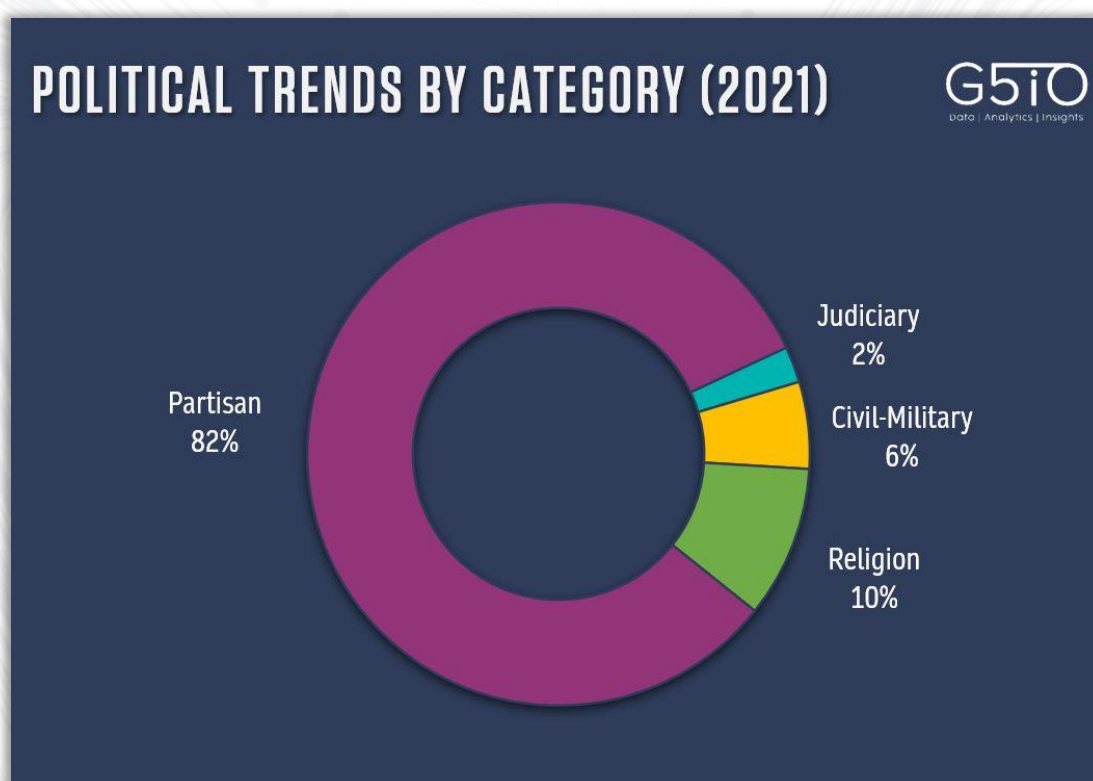
What's more, politics related trends exhibited an inverse relationship with sports where online conversations around the Pakistan Super League (PSL) and the World Cup for instance, consistently dominated politics related topics. In contrast, hashtags related to Governance related matters exhibited a positive relationship with Political trends. These trended with a higher frequency around events such as the Aurat March, student-led protests and the Noor Mukadam case.



Narratives in Political Trends:

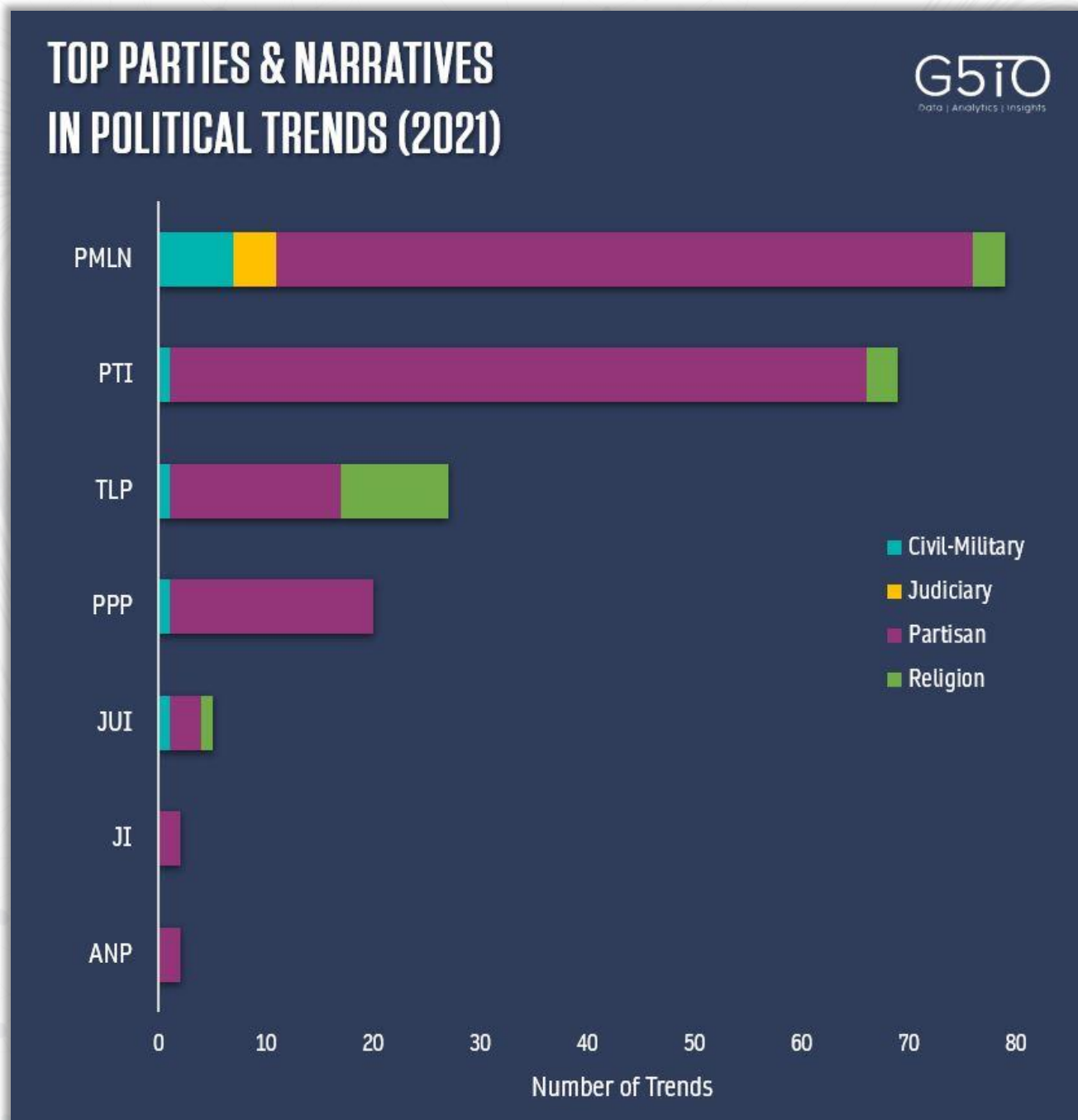
Diving deeper into the most popular category - i.e., Politics - we were able to distill a secondary sample of 2210 hashtags which were then further coded along party lines and political narratives. Our goal was to estimate (a) which of Pakistan's political parties remained the most prominent across Twitter and (b) what types of political narratives were employed by them.

Based on this sample, our findings show that partisan politics comprised more than 80% of all politics related trends and campaigns online, followed by Religion at 10%.



Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) - the main opposition party - and the ruling Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI), relied mostly on partisan politics employing targeted and polarized narratives. However, narratives pushed by the PMLN also politicized issues related to the judiciary and civil-military relations, more than any other political party. In contrast, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a radical Islamist political party relied on a disproportionate politicization of religious issues as part of its online trends and campaigns.

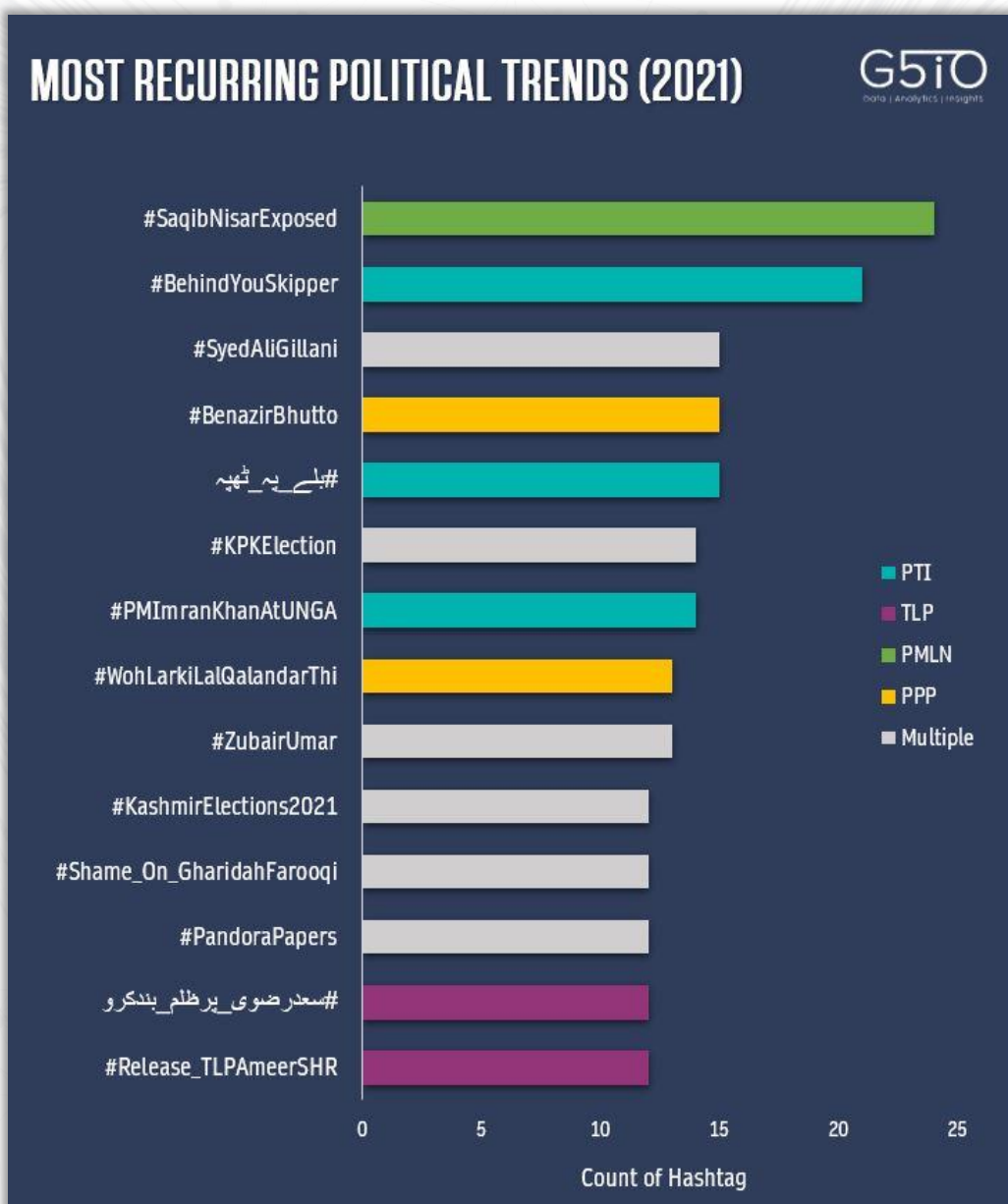
Despite being one of the most influential political parties, the lack of trends pushed by the Pakistan People’s Party’s (PPP) testified to their relatively muted presence on Twitter. Similarly, other political parties such as the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (JUI), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and Awami National Party (ANP) also exhibited a very limited social media presence.



Most Recurring Political Trends:

Taking a closer look at hashtags related to Politics, we wanted to see the most recurring issues that consistently trended throughout the year. As shown below, the most recurring Political trends were based around key political figures such as Imran Khan, Benazir Bhutto and Syed Ali Gillani. In effect representing the central nature of each of their standing and personality cults in relation to their parties or movements.

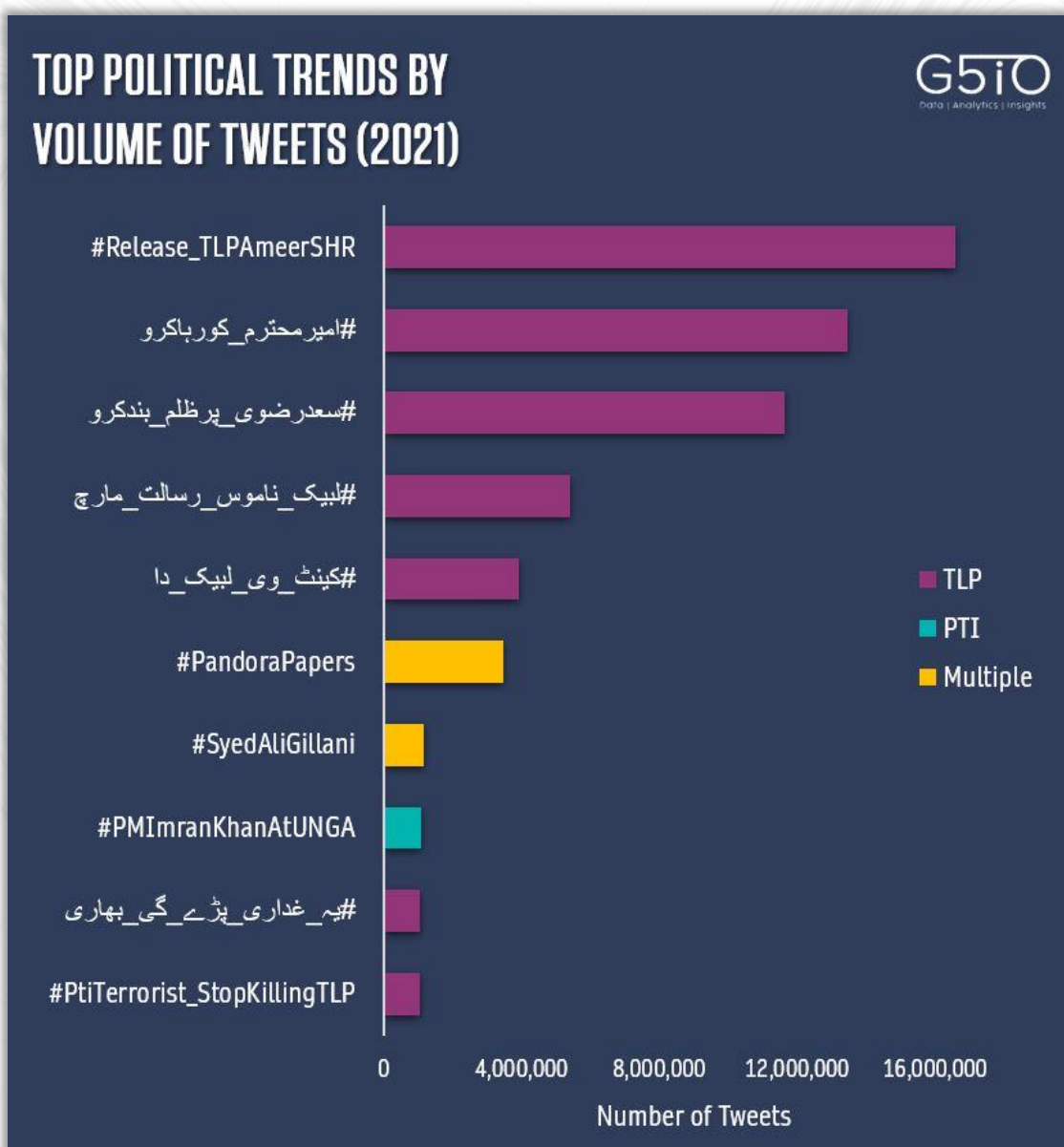
However, the most prominent issue to have trended across 2021 repeatedly was in relation to Justice Saqib Nisar and the more general wave of judicial activism as pushed mostly by the PMLN. On the whole, PTI dominated political discourse on Twitter.



Top Political Trends by Volume of Tweets:

While the previous graphs looked at the number of politics related hashtags as representative of the number of campaigns or issues politicized by each party, categorizing these hashtags by raw tweet volumes however presents a different picture.

When we look at the top 10 hashtags based on tweet volumes, 7 out of 10 of these trends were related to the TLP – and that too comprising fringe narratives that exhibited more of a disparate echo chamber as opposed to an actual representation of discourse at the national level.



Conclusion

Drawing on an entire year's worth of top twitter trends, our study aimed at showcasing not only the most popular topics that trended in Pakistan throughout 2021 but also some insights into what they represented. We learned that:

- Twitter discourse in Pakistan was dominated by Partisan Politics in 2021, led by PTI and PMLN.
- Political discourse is overshadowed by conversations on Sports around national or international sporting events
- TLP related hashtags, while high in terms of volume, were run in an echo-chamber, hence not representative of overall online discourse.

Authors



Asra Malik is a Senior Analyst with an interest in mapping and understanding digital behavior, trends and evolving norms online.



Abu Bakar Naeem is a Data Insight Specialist. His work stems from unveiling patterns of polarization and bias across a diverse range of online discourses



M Waqas Jan is a Senior Analyst with an interest in discursive approaches to South Asian peace, conflict, and security studies.



Hussain Khawaja is a Senior Data Scientist with an interest in OSINT, Natural Language Processing, Social Network Analysis and Explainable AI.



Hania Ahmed is a Digital Insight Specialist. Her interests lie in analysing the impact of global economic trends from a political economy perspective.