

Lettergate: Disinfo, Fake News & Political Turmoil in Pakistan

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Summary

- Given the current political turmoil and instability centered around the ouster of Imran Khan's government, there has been a marked increase in disinformation and fake news proliferating throughout Pakistan's digital space.
- As has been evident the purpose of such disinformation has been to attack state institutions and promote instability and chaos by amplifying civil military discord in Pakistan.
- Our goal being to highlight both the processes and discourses being proliferated.

Methodology

- Our report is based on narratives proliferated since the 10th of April, particularly the day following the successful passing of the No Confidence Vote in the Pakistani National Assembly.
- These include narratives pushed in the form of tweets, news reports and official Press Releases by multiple actors and organizations both local and foreign.

Local News Articles

1. A news article published by BBC News Urdu portrayed the ouster of the Imran Khan government as an outcome of growing civil military discord. Lacking any quotable sources or references the article claimed that it was a late visit my top military leadership

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at the Prime Minister's house which ultimately led to the Prime Minister succumbing to pressure and vacating his seat.

The story having gone viral amidst the turmoil and confusion was termed as 'baseless and a pack full of lies' by ISPR, the media and PR wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces.

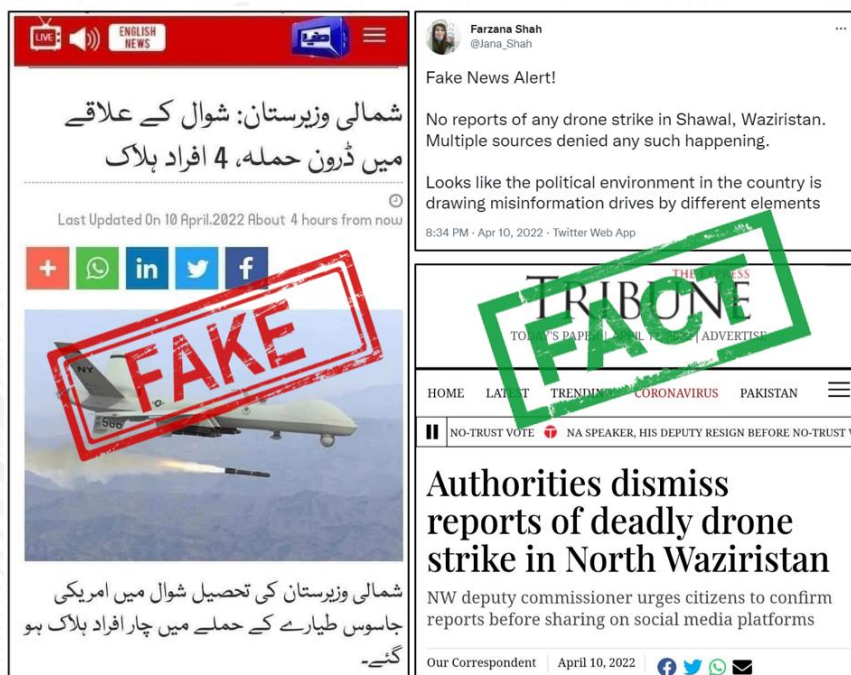


2. The same day, unverified reports of an American drone attack in North Waziristan were circulated across multiple social media platforms. The narrative being that one of the primary reasons why Imran Khan had been ousted was due to his refusal to provide the US with operational bases within Pakistan for carrying out drone strikes in Afghanistan and its bordering areas with Pakistan.

Hence, the report of the drone strike was pushed as clear 'evidence' of US complicity behind its sponsored 'regime change' in Pakistan.

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These reports however were confirmed to be fake by various official sources and authorities, including the Deputy Commissioner of North Waziristan.



3. With a new government in place, a news report discrediting the previous government was published by the Friday Times, claiming that a necklace which former Prime Minister Imran Khan had received as a gift was not sent to the state gift repository but given to former special assistant Zulfi Bokhari. The story was refuted by Zulfi Bukhari, who denied selling anything from the state gift repository, terming it as slander.

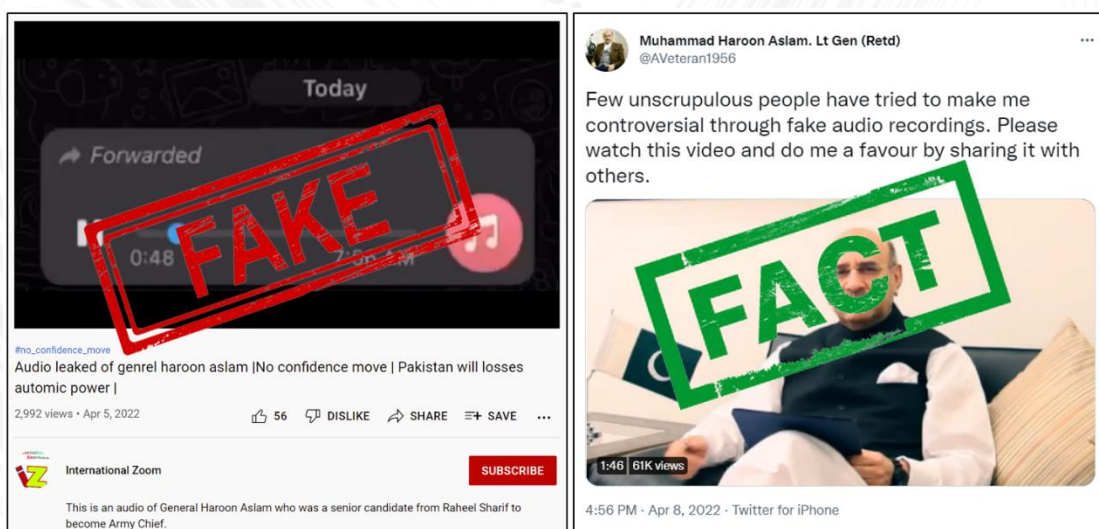


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WhatsApp Audio Clips

Similarly, several audio clips purportedly from retired senior military officials also started doing the rounds on both public and private messaging platforms all with similar narratives. The purpose being to amplify general rumors of there being widespread discord amongst the military's retired and serving officers regarding the current political situation.

4. A fake audio clip of Lt General Haroon was circulated across social platforms, including WhatsApp, where he was allegedly expressing concern over foreign interference in regime change in Pakistan, and the subsequent safety of Pakistan's Nuclear assets. The audio was then refuted by General Haroon himself in a video shared via his own twitter account



5. A fake audio clip of General Ijaz Awan was also circulated, where he was allegedly using abusive language against the Pakistan army, while holding the institution responsible for the No Confidence Motion and the ouster of Imran Khan. The audio clip was clarified to be fake by General Ijaz Awan himself.



- Another fake audio clip of the ex-Chief of Army Staff, General Mirza Aslam Baig was circulated across Social Media platforms, criticizing the current COAS for the removal of Imran Khan, and the increasing resentment amongst the military's ranks. Later, the ISPR debunked the audio clip as fake and part of the coordinated disinformation campaign against the armed forces and institutions.



Indian Media

While the above narratives carried with them unnamed, obscure and untraceable sources, the fact these were amplified and consistently pushed by mainstream Indian media points to a deliberate attempt to amplify civil military fault lines. Especially considering the highly charged and polarized atmosphere within Pakistan, the following excerpts and screenshots present a cogent example of how the Indian disinformation campaigns took full advantage of this situation. This was done with the express purpose of amplifying civil-military discord, discrediting Pakistani institutions (such as the military, judiciary and parliament) and instigating further political instability in a highly volatile situation.

For instance, the story published by the Telegraph India built on the same narrative of the discredited BBC Urdu story mentioned above. The same lines were parroted by known Indian journalists and commentators linked with the Indian deep state

The Telegraph @ttindia

According to reports, Khan made a botched attempt to replace Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa
@ImranKhanPTI #ImranKhanVsWesternSlaves
#ImranKhanPrimeMinister #BajwaSurrender

telegraphindia.com
Imran Khan tried to sack Army chief Gen. Bajwa before ouster: Reports
There are claims a helicopter carrying two uninvited guests landed in then Prime Minister's House in the night and were escorted by Army soldiers inside

3:09 PM · Apr 10, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) @majorgauravarya

Just heard from sources that 111 Infantry Brigade is active. Don't know if that's true but if it is, Imran Khan has pushed Gen Bajwa to the limit.

9:01 PM · Apr 9, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

sushant sareen @sushantsareen

The rumours of Bajwa sacking last night were apparently correct. But Imran Khan wasn't able to issue notification because no one was taking his orders anymore. Once he realised its game over, the rumours of sacking were denied.

8:15 AM · Apr 10, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

The same holds true for the narratives aimed at discrediting the Imran Khan government after its ouster. The story of the 'necklace' for instance while having received limited traction within Pakistan was still widely sensationalized and blown out of proportion in India



All of these examples point to how Indian media which relying on exaggerated and sensationalized headlines, has extensively propagated such narratives with the sole aim of pushing a narrative of Civilian Military discord within Pakistan .

